

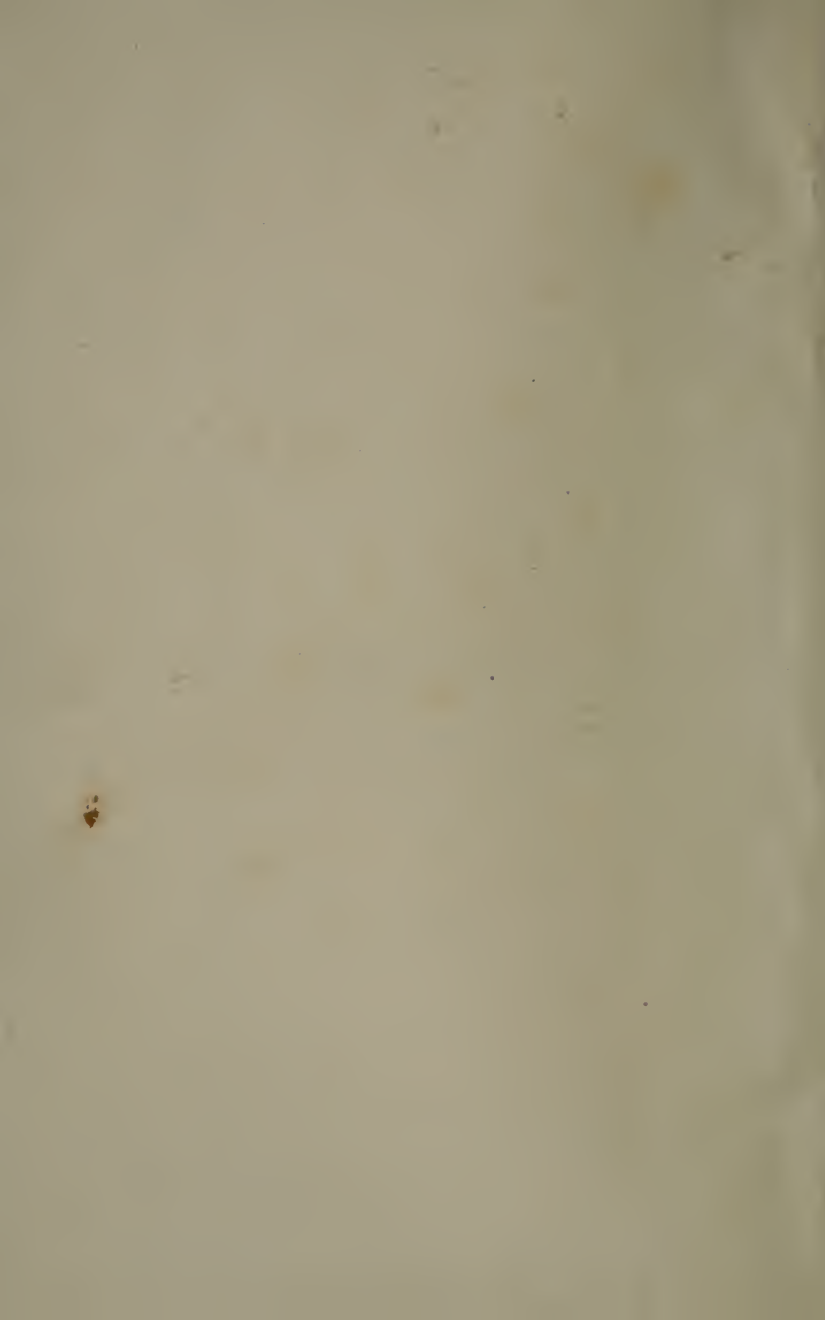


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HIS COUSIN ADAIR

“Time but the impression stronger makes,
As streams their channels deeper wear.”

HIS COUSIN ADAIR

BY

GORDON ROY

AUTHOR OF

'FOR HER SAKE,' 'FOR BETTER FOR WORSE'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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BOOK I.

(CONTINUED)

HIS COUSIN ADAIR.

CHAPTER XIII.

EARLSHOPE was all astir next morning long before the hour for the usual late dawdling breakfast, and when the non-shooting half of creation made its more tardy appearance, the house seemed very quiet and empty, and the breakfast-table showed many a yawning gap. As Lord Romer had said, the moors were at some distance from the house, where along the upper waters of the Rule the rolling green pastoral hills gave place to darker heather-clad slopes, so, according to the more enthusiastic sportsmen, an early start was necessary.

Douglas and Lord Romer himself, with several others, were off earliest in the morning, only returning when compelled to leave off by the darkness. They would come in when dinner was half over, and would often adjourn at once to the smoking-room, without coming to the drawing-room at all. Had it not been for this daily prospect of escape for long hours upon the open hills and moors, for which no explanation or excuse was required, Douglas felt he could not have got through these days at all. His intercourse with Miss Charteris was narrowed down to some brief chance meeting, or to the hour after dinner, when anything like a *tête-à-tête* was impossible. So at least he told himself, though, under other circumstances, the great room, with its shadowy corners and changing groups, might have afforded considerable facilities in that direction.

That Miss Charteris should long be deceived was not to be expected. She was far too keensighted. From her very arrival, before Douglas had even spoken to her, she had felt the

change. She saw that there was no quick lighting-up of his face, no sunny genial kindling of the grey-blue eyes. He was not acting so long as he was the mere indifferent acquaintance; it was only when he tried to be the lover once more that the effort became apparent. Cicely Charteris was that type of woman of whom the disconsolate swain sings—

“ Alack ! for I lo’ed her ower weel,
And the women lo’e sic a man less.”

What was lavishly given was lightly held. While Douglas had been the wooer, she had remained cool enough; but now that her power over him seemed entirely to have ceased, pride and passion were both up in arms. Pride, that would have led most women to dismiss an indifferent suitor, took another form in her. She would compel him to return to his allegiance; he would acknowledge her power and yield to it, as he had done before. He was hers—she would not give him up. No one should triumph over her, least of all a mere raw country girl; for though

Douglas had only exchanged a few words with Adair in her presence, Cicely's intuition had instantly divined that there was her rival. Since that first evening she had changed her tactics. She was too clever not to be conscious of her mistake in speaking to Douglas of his cousin as she had done ; but in the first pang of the discovery pain had conquered prudence, and for the moment she had found a certain relief in wounding him in return. As a skilful fisher, conscious that a big salmon is well hooked, gives it plenty of line at first, so Cicely did not strain the cord. She was apparently the least exacting of *fiancées*, putting up smilingly with Douglas's long absences on the moors, and making but little claim on him when they chanced to be together. She might be mistaken—it might not be so serious after all. From Isabel's talk she had gathered that there had been some boy-and-girl flirtation between Adair and Douglas—it might be merely his return home, and the renewal of old ways. She would wait and see,—proof in one direction or another would be forthcoming

soon enough. Then apart from the satisfaction of her pride, Earlshope was worth a struggle—a conviction that deepened day by day. Proof, as she expected, came soon enough.

A few days later the “Muirshiels ruck,” as Isabel elegantly termed the commercial magnates of that thriving town, had been invited to dine, and the question naturally arose how the inevitable evening was to be got through. The Earlstouns had not for many a year been particularly popular in their own county. The few old families who lived on their estates and regarded Edinburgh as “town” resented the fact that Earlshope was only used as a shooting-lodge, as old General Jardine said; and there was a general impression that Mrs Earlstoun, her family, and above all her visitors, looked down upon Scotch people and all things Scotch. Mr Earlstoun took not the faintest interest in agricultural matters, which might have been a link between him and his neighbours, and left the management of the estate practically in his agent’s hands. Neither did he care for politics, so that there

had been no necessity for cultivating the Muirshiels manufacturers; while Maurice had taken not the slightest pains to conceal his contemptuous indifference for "the natives," and Douglas had had as yet no opportunity of atoning for his family's shortcomings. Under those circumstances the impending dinner-party bade fair to be anything but a festive gathering.

"We must do something with those people," said Isabel; "the ordinary talk and tunes that pass a night well enough, when people can or will talk, are not enough. There is no use of getting Elfie to play, for they couldn't understand it. I can imagine Mrs Provost Pirret folding her hands across her crimson satin stomach"—("My dear Isabel!" exclaimed Mrs Earlstoun)—"and saying, 'Gie me a guid Scotch sang, or even a tune on the piawny, an' ye may keep the rest o' your music for me,'" went on Isabel, unmoved. "It is very tiresome that Douglas won't hear of Miss Charteris acting, or even reciting anything. What is the good of having her here if we cannot make any

use of her? I suggested it this morning, and he flew into a perfect fury. His love affairs are not sweetening his temper, I must say."

"Poor boy!" said Mrs Earlstoun, with a quick impatient sigh; "I don't wonder. I cannot endure that girl, Isabel! I have tried to think of her as Douglas's wife. I have tried to like her, or rather not to *dislike* her, but I cannot bear her. I am sure she is a cruel, bad-hearted, vindictive woman. She will hold Douglas to his word out of sheer malignity, and all the more if she sees, as she must see, the real state of things."

"For mercy's sake, mother, don't excite yourself next. One in a family is quite enough at a time. Miss Charteris *is* a cat, there is no doubt of that. When she fixes those yellow eyes of hers on me, I always feel inclined to say propitiatingly, 'Pussy, pussy, pussy.' Sometimes I feel she will certainly spit and fly at me."

"A tiger-cat, I am afraid," said Mrs Earlstoun.

"Well, she is not Douglas's wife yet, and to-night is much more imminent. If only

for Sir Claud's sake, we can't have the drawing-room divided into two camps, and Mrs Milbrooke and Lord Romer staring at the natives and making fun of them."

"Cannot you consult the others, Isabel? They might be able to suggest something. I get so tired of it all sometimes. When you are Lady Maxwell, my dear, I think I will hand Clara over to you, and get a little peace in my old age." Mrs Earlstoun smiled, but there was a weary fall in her voice.

"This dismal day is giving you the blues, mother," said Isabel, looking at her in surprise. "We might have *tableaux*," she went on musingly; "they are played out, like everything else, of course, but they might be something of a novelty here still. Miss Charteris might help—Douglas could not object to that; and Mr Dallas ought to be of some use. I'll go and propose it,—it will be something to discuss, at all events," rising.

Mrs Earlstoun threw herself back in her chair, and sat looking out at the slow ceaseless dropping of the rain, an expression of spirit-

less dejection clouding the beautiful face. What was the matter? she asked herself at times, with a sort of vague unconfessed alarm at this growing weariness, whether of mind or body she could hardly tell—at the increasing effort it cost her to put her anxieties aside, and be the unconcerned gracious hostess as usual. Society had been her life—she had spent and been spent in its service for many a year; if she grew tired of it, what was there left? She had been tired often enough before, or had professed it—bored, *ennuyée* with the same old round, the same old faces; but this was something different. Sitting there in the silence of her great stately house, the only sound the slow dreary drip, drip of the rain, a sudden sense of weary loneliness overwhelmed her. What was she to any one underneath that roof—husband, or children, or friends? Was she going to be ill?—in that case Isabel would send Pincott and the best doctors. Douglas?—poor boy! his mother was something more than a name to him still; but for good or for evil, he had gone from her: she could never

have much share in his life again. Little Clara was already beginning to sigh for the day when she too might spread her wings. A lifetime of social success and splendour—and what had it left her? An empty heart, deepening loneliness, age coming, hope failing, the savour gone from all that till now had been life to her. At such a moment how many of us have courage steadily to face the future? Mrs Earlstoun turned away affrighted. Isabel was right, as she always was. Brooding did no good. Save for this one heavy anxiety as to her son, what more could she ask? What other lot could she have wished for Isabel than the one that was so evidently preparing for her? She must not let one trouble warp everything. In some way Douglas must be brought to reason; it must come right somehow—trying to reason herself back to the cheerful conviction to which we all more or less consciously cling, in spite of all the teaching of life, that what is desirable must therefore happen, and that our wishes can guide the course of events.

"I am growing nervous, and I have always despised nerves," she said to herself, with rather an unsteady laugh. She rose and looked at herself in the glass, as if trying to gather courage from the steady brightness of the eyes that smiled back reassuringly at her. That smile seemed to set age and all those vague creeping terrors at defiance. Life need not be confessed a failure yet!

Meantime Isabel's proposal was being hailed with acclamation in the billiard-room, where most of the party were gathered. The day was too hopelessly wet for even the most inveterate sportsman to attempt the moors, while not the most determinedly sanguine eye could detect the slightest break in the heavy grey mist that muffled hill and glen in its swathing folds, and reduced the visible universe to the circumference of a few sloppy yards. The stables had been visited in the morning, endless cigars had already been smoked, and games of billiards played. Lunch was just over, there was no prospect of any change in the situation for some hours to

come, so Isabel's suggestion was welcomed with a warmth that was perhaps a little surprising even to her self-complacency. Most people, besides, find a singular pleasure in "dressing-up," whether it be a survival of the childish delight in it, or another form of the maturer desire for an occasional escape from our daily selves and surroundings. There was an immediate exodus to decide whether the hall or the drawing-room would be the more suitable place, and a babel of regrets arose that there was so little time for preparation, mingled with suggestions of every possible and impossible costume and scene. Dallas proposed that, as an appropriate compliment to the guests, the *tableaux* should be taken from Border ballads or history — "of which they probably know a great deal less than you," put in Douglas.

"If you want Border ballads, we had better have Elfie across," said Isabel.

"She would be a great help, certainly," said Dallas; "but," — with an expressive glance at the dripping trees and soaking grass outside.

“Oh, she won’t mind the rain,” said Isabel coolly; “she would be coming in the evening at any rate.”

“I shall go and see if she is inclined to sacrifice herself for the entertainment of the mob,” said Douglas.

“Get Adair to come too,” Isabel called after him, as he hastily left the room; “tell her we need her,”—and then wondered why Mr Dallas should be frowning so.

As Douglas passed the library door it suddenly opened, and to his amazement Adair came hurriedly out, and closed it quickly behind her. She was paler than usual, he thought: there was a sombre glow in the depth of her eyes; her long dark cloak was heavy with rain; and on her bright ruffled hair, from which the hood had been pushed back, raindrops were still glistening. At the sight of Douglas the colour rushed to her face.

“What is the matter, Adair? Is anything wrong?” he exclaimed, coming forward eagerly.

“No,” she said coldly, in spite of her evi-

dent agitation. "I only wished to see my uncle about—about a trifle."

"Could not I have been of some use? Could I not have helped you, Adair?"—a deeper thrill of tenderness in his reproachful questions than possibly he was aware of. "My father does not mean to be unkind, I am sure; but he does get so absorbed in those dry-as-dust old books and things: goodness knows what interest they can have for any living man! It takes me about half an hour to wake him up to the fact of my existence,—to say nothing of getting him to understand what I want. Once or twice, when I've been in a hurry, I confess I've had a most irreverent longing to shake him—poor old dad! Are you sure that you really got him fairly out of the Stone Age or the Bronze Period to know what you wanted? Shall we go back and make sure? Could you not have told me, Adair?"

"You!" said Adair, with a choked, gasping sort of laugh. "You!"

That had not been a pleasant morning at the Old Manse. The afternoon before, "the

runner" had left a couple of letters—the bills from the Edinburgh shops; and when Adair had returned from Earlshope, she had found her mother and Agnes looking over them with somewhat blank faces.

"It is a shame!" said Agnes angrily. "I am sure they have charged double what they told us at the time. I counted it all up when we came home, and it did not amount to the half of that. Well, Uncle Alex or Aunt Evelyn must help us with it, for it was altogether on their account we got those things, and after all I have not been asked across half a dozen times yet; it is too bad. Lord Romer was asking me only yesterday why it was always you, and never I, who came. It is not fair—it is not, indeed."

"Providence sends nuts to those who have no teeth," quoted Adair, trying to laugh. "For my part, Aggie, you would be heartily welcome to my evenings at Earlshope." She picked up the bills, and began to look over them. Certainly the various little items, each of which had seemed trifling enough at the

time,—the gloves and the lace and the ribbons on which Agnes had insisted,—mounted up now to a most ominous total.

Agnes grumbled on—"Oh, it is all very fine. That is what you always say; but why can't you give Aunt Evelyn a hint that she might ask me sometimes instead of you, when you care so little for it? I think, when you have had all the enjoyment, the least thing you can do now is to save mammy the trouble of asking Uncle Alex for the money. Don't you think that would be only fair, mammy?"

Adair threw down the paper, and looked speechlessly from her mother to her sister.

"Indeed, my dear," said her mother, "I think it would come more naturally from you. If I go to your uncle, he might tell me that I ought not to have let you spend so much; but if you go, there is no need of letting him understand that I know about it. Two young things like you and Aggie going shopping couldn't be very much blamed for going a little beyond what was prudent, perhaps; and you don't need to *say* it, of course, but

you could infer, you know, that you wouldn't like me to be troubled about it, and so had come to him. I am sure you could manage it very nicely in that way."

"Oh, mother!" was all that Adair could say.

"I think it might have occurred to you to *offer* to do it," went on Mrs Earlstoun, growing injured. "As Aggie says, you have had all the pleasure. You never seem to think that it is hard on poor Aggie to have even Elfie asked across oftener than she; and though it is always painful for me to speak of myself, you might surely think how distressing it would be for me to go and beg as a favour for what is really my right. If your poor dear father had not been so trusting, things would have been very different. To think that I can't set my foot in my poor dear husband's home without waiting for that haughty woman's permission, and yet my own child won't spare me the humiliation of going there to beg for money for the very clothes she is wearing there night after night!" drawing out her handkerchief.

"I think you forget, mother," said Adair,

trying to control herself, "that from the very first I said we ought not to get those things, since they could only be paid for by this humiliation, as you very justly call it; and if you will take the trouble to look, you will see that there is scarcely anything for me in all that list."

"It is very generous of you to cast that up now," Agnes fired up. "But I would like to know who insisted on getting a new dress for Elfie, as if anything would not have done for her."

"There is no need of saying anything more, Agnes: if your sister does not see it to be her duty, I cannot help it. I shall not go to Earlshope, but the first time Douglas comes across I shall speak to him. He is the only one of them all who has any proper sense of what is due to me."

"Mother, you shall not," exclaimed Adair, springing to her feet, her eyes blazing—"anything but that: would you shame us all?"

Mrs Earlstoun rose with the utmost dignity, took her candle, and left the room. Agnes

followed, saying severely, "I don't know how you can say such things, Adair. I hope you may have a pleasant night after all this."

And a pleasant night Adair did have: her warm heart and her tender conscience were two as skilful tormentors as could have been devised. All night through the figures on those long blue sheets danced before her eyes in the darkness; or if she did sleep, it was to dream that she had asked Douglas for the money before every one at Earlshope, and that he had stood by laughing while Miss Charteris read out item after item, and Isabel counted out the amount in sixpences. Towards morning, from sheer weariness, she fell asleep, and coming down rather later than usual, met Agnes coming up-stairs on ostentatious tiptoe carrying a tray, on which was a cup of tea and a solitary piece of toast. "Mother has had a very bad night," she vouchsafed in a noisy whisper in passing. After all this, it was perhaps little wonder that Adair, as soon as her morning duties were over, pulled on her cloak, and set off through the streaming rain to Earlshope.

She had been too hasty, but they were unjust to her—cruelly unjust; but anything rather than that appeal to Douglas which her mother had threatened. Surely she could never have meant it! Adair's cheeks, and her heart too, burned at the very thought, till she was thankful to feel the cold rain beating on her face. It was only when her hand was on the library door that Adair suddenly began to wonder what she should say to her uncle. Beyond his stereotyped formula, on meeting her year after year,—“Let me see now; which are you? Adair? yes, to be sure, Adair; how you do grow, my dear!” uttered in a kindly absent sort of way, she had hardly ever exchanged words with him. He was to all appearance an absolute cipher in his own house, spending most of his time in the big library alone, or with an occasional like-minded guest. To-day, however, instead of being occupied with some crabbed old book, or his “stones and bones,” as his children irreverently termed his various specimens, he had a quantity of letters and papers spread before him, bear-

ing a strong family resemblance to those which had been photographed during the night watches on Adair's weary brain. He kept looking at them in an absent way, while Adair falteringly tried to explain her errand. Suddenly a light seemed to break in upon him ; he looked up, the bushy sandy eyebrows contracting in a worried frown. "So you want money too, Adair ! Let me see,—you are Adair ? yes. Everybody comes to me with the same story,—it's money, money, from morning to night ; and here Ferguson writes me to-day—however, that doesn't matter—and now you too. What can you want money for ? I give your mother the house and all that she has, except her trifle of a pension ; some people would think that was enough. What's it for, eh ?"

"We—we had to get some dresses, uncle," stammered out Adair, turning from scarlet to white. Oh, for independence, for the power of making a little money ! She would send Mirren away, she would go and be a servant herself—anything rather than this ! And yet she must take the money if it were given her.

“Dresses ! Your mother might have brought you up to be more careful, I should think. I don’t know what you need, in a quiet place like this, with so much dress. Where is my cheque-book ?” tumbling over the papers. “Well, how much do you want ? Will ten pounds do ?”

Adair shaped her lips to a “yes.” She would have needed twenty, but not for anything on earth could she have asked for more.

“There,” said her uncle, rising, “I’ve made it fifteen ; that should get a good many fal-lals for you.” Adair tried to get out some words of thanks, wondering involuntarily how far fifteen pounds would pay for one of Isabel’s gowns.

“There, there,” said Mr Earlstoun, dropping back into his everyday tone ; “never mind what I said. I’m fairly bothered to death just now. Ferguson ought to manage things better. I’m sure I can’t understand it”—his eyes wandering back to the confused papers. “But don’t vex yourself, my dear,” patting her on the shoulder ; “you will get a good

husband of your own some day to pay for your gowns for you."

After all this, when Douglas asked eagerly, "Could you not have told *me*?" it was perhaps little wonder if the "you!" which was all Adair could utter, was nearly hysterical.

"Yes, I; and why not I?" said Douglas hotly. "You know, Adair—you *must* know—that if only I could do anything for you——"

"Douglas!" exclaimed Miss Charteris, suddenly appearing from the drawing-room. "It is you, Miss Adair; how fortunate! You are in great request at present,—or is it your sister who is the authority on Border lore?" The light from behind her fell full on the two agitated faces. Douglas dropped Adair's hands, which he had been half unconsciously holding.

"I was going to fetch Elfie—if she cares to come, that is," with a sudden change of voice. "I shall take the dog-cart, of course—it is not a day for her to walk. Shall I take you home, or will you wait for her?" he asked.

"I had better wait if Elfie is coming," said

Adair, reluctantly enough. "But what can you want with Elfie?"

"Why, have you not got that explained yet?" laughed Miss Charteris. "You had better go, Mr Earlstoun, for we are all waiting on our oracle, and I shall enlighten Miss Adair. I thought you were already come back when I met you escorting a dripping figure. Let me help you with your cloak. No, we don't need you, Mr Earlstoun," as Douglas made a motion to do it.

"You and your cousin are great allies, I suppose," said Miss Charteris, working away, in spite of Adair's protests, with the clasp of her cloak, and looking up in her face the while.

"Naturally," said Adair, with a smile; "we have known each other all our lives. But, please, do not trouble any more," trying to free herself from the detaining hands. If Adair had been nervous, those busy hands so near her throat, and the fixed look of the dilating eyes, might have been unpleasantly suggestive.

“Ah! that must be very pleasant. You must feel quite as if he were your brother.” *Did she?* The quick colour flooded her face. Miss Charteris smiled. “Ah, that is it now,” undoing the clasp at last, and letting Adair escape.

CHAPTER XIV.

As Isabel had said, the drawing-room in the evening threatened to divide itself not only into two camps but three. The county people chose to consider themselves slighted because they had been invited along with the townsfolk. "Confound it all!" said choleric old General Jardine. "I don't need to be touchy,—it is well enough known who the Jardines are; but all the same, I don't take it as any compliment to be asked here with Pirret and Johnstone and all the rest of them. We all know what they're here for. Earls-toun is nursing the constituency for that little fool Maxwell, in order to catch him for his daughter; or it'll be the mother's doing rather, for I don't fancy the old haverel would ever think of such a thing. Well, I hope they'll

succeed, I am sure, for I don't know how they keep all this up," looking round the great room, "with the state land is in; and we've not seen the worst of it yet, mark my words," shaking his old grey head solemnly.

"Have you seen much of this son that has come home? He is liker the old stock, at least," said Sir Robert Cranstoun, to whom the General was relieving his mind.

"No; but I hear he is a very keen shot, and out on the hills all day. It's always a better sign of a man when he's fond of honest outdoor sport. It would have been wiser-like if he had been standing for Muirshiels, and doing something for the family credit; it is not out of the need of it. That eldest one was just a cold, sneering, good-looking devil. Man, I heard a fine story of him,"—and General Jardine dropped into a local *chronique scandaleuse*, over which the two old heads nodded with the utmost relish.

To Messrs Pirret and Johnstone, and the Muirshiels contingent generally, it was their first visit to Earlshope, and each was secretly

a little overawed, in spite of the Radical, not to say Republican, creed of the town, and the fine theoretic contempt in which birth and breeding, high descent, or long pedigree were held there. The worthy Provost and some others adopted a slightly swaggering air to cover this inward discomfiture. They looked at the grim old weapons and armour in the hall, hacked and dented in many a fierce fight from Halidoun to Pinkie, and at dusky old family portraits, with an appraising air, as if they were no better than so much old iron and indifferently daubed canvas. Of course it was a much more legitimate subject for pride to have filled the narrow valley of the Rule with long weaving-sheds and whirring woollen mills, and to have turned a mere hamlet into a flourishing town, and given employment to busy hundreds, than to be the mere inheritor of lands and wealth, plundered from "the people" by the rapacity and brute force of one's forefathers. On such subjects, and the superiority of modern times and men generally, Mr Pirret would

dilate to any extent on the Town Hall platform, or in the dining-room of his brand-new villa. Yet when Mr Earlstoun came up in his shambling absent way, and made a remark on the weather which he never noticed, or the state of trade of which he knew nothing, he was listened to with the utmost deference by the good Provost; while his spouse could only blurt out a nervous "Yes, ma'am" or "No, ma'am" when her hostess inclined her graceful head towards her, and made some attempt at talk. In her turn, Mrs Pirret tried to reassure herself by declaring to Mrs Brown that there had been nothing on the table half so fine or costly as the epergne the council had presented to the Provost at the close of the last term; and that, yard for yard, she was certain that Mrs Earlstoun's velvet, when it was new, which it wasn't now, could not have cost any more than her *moiré*, or Mrs Brown's brocade for that matter, and that after all it was no such great thing to be a duke's grand-daughter. And Mrs Brown took up her parable, saying that

Miss Earlstoun was a fine, well-grown young woman enough, but for looks give her Minnie Pirret, or her own Jessie; and if that was the way fine ladies dressed and went on, *she* didn't know, but she wished some one would put a shawl round that woman's shoulders, whether she were Lady Lorrimore or no. And Mrs Pirret replied, with something between a sigh and a smack, that the less said of some of our nobility the better, which led to a long conversation and much virtuous indignation over a certain *cause célèbre* then proceeding in the divorce court, and which had crowded out even Irish affairs and local intelligence from the columns of the 'Muirshiels Patriot.'

Miss Charteris, too, was watched with a breathless would-be shocked curiosity. She would have attracted attention anywhere from the singular semi-savage splendour of her dress—a soft dusky-red silken stuff, crusted with gold embroideries, and draped round her tall slender figure somewhat after the old Greek fashion. The crossing folds of the bodice were clasped on the shoulders with

heavy gold ornaments, and round her coils of dark hair was a circlet of dim gold. With her swarthy skin and lithe supple grace of attitude and movement, she seemed like some princess from a far-away half barbarous isle, amid the throng of everyday faces and the latest fashions.

“Is that Miss Charteris?” exclaimed Mrs Mackay, pouncing upon Adair at the earliest opportunity. “I knew it,” she exclaimed triumphantly, elated at her extraordinary perspicacity; “I said to myself, that is she, the moment I came into the room. Will that be one of her play-acting gowns, now? for I’m sure no modest woman would wear such a thing, all loose and hanging, and her arms bare to the very shoulder-head—the Jezebel!”

“It seems to me a great deal more modest than some of the gowns here,” said Adair drily.

There was a little stir of pleasurable excitement when the company were marshalled to the rows of seats ranged before the curtained arch opening into the conservatory. They could talk to each other any day, and

had been growing a little tired of discussing their hosts and their friends, while the favoured few who had been honoured with more than a passing notice from Mrs Earls-toun or her visitors had found the attitude of mental tiptoe required for such exalted converse decidedly fatiguing. Every one had a more or less conscious sense of relief, although some were rather uncertain what *tableaux* might be. Mrs Mackay detected the cloven foot at once in the curtained recess, and seriously questioned whether she ought not to withdraw before being contaminated by witnessing anything in the nature of a theatrical display. However, as it fortunately occurred to her that she must see before she could judge, she kept her seat, which happened to be a very well placed one.

After an apology for the very impromptu character of the entertainment, the curtains parted, to disclose "Lucy's Flittin'," that simplest and most pathetic of pastorals. Agnes was not, perhaps, an ideal representative of the simple sorrowful girl, who,

“ When the wan leaf frae the birk-tree was fa’in’,
And Martinmas dowie had wound up the year,”

leaves, with many a foreboding, her service and her swain at once, any more than Lord Romer was of “kind Jamie.” The audience, however, was not critical, and “Lucy” was applauded in a manner that deepened the pink flush most becomingly on her cheeks.

The second struck a deeper note. It was taken from the wild ballad of the “Eve of St John,” when, by the lonely flame on the Beacon Hill, the lady meets at midnight with her lover, and not knowing that it is but the phantom of him who had been slain in lawless revenge for as lawless love, conjures the vision to her bower. Cicely Charteris was the lady to whom so awful a token of that visit was left, while Dallas, in knightly armour, was the ill-fated lover. The leaping flames from the brazier, which simulated the “bale-fire,” lit up the two faces, illuminating the deep eyes, looking with a fixed mournful gaze from the open visor of the knight’s helmet, and revealing the look of consuming

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passion stamped on Cicely's face. Adair watched her with a kind of startled fascination. Was that look only called there by the part she had to play, or was it a revelation of what might lie beneath? Out of her eyes were looking insatiable desire, daring resolve, the imperious cravings of a nature where self was all in all. Well might the vision say—

“I had not had power to come to thy bower,
Hadst thou not conjured me so.”

If the lady of Smailholm had looked at her lover with Cicely's eyes, man or spirit might well have been conquered by their irresistible constraining power, apart from any appeal to saint or relic, as in the poem. A deeper hush fell on the audience, the least impressive were thrilled, and there was something like a little shiver of relief when the curtain fell and released them from the spell.

Other pictures followed, which Adair hardly noticed. She was still feeling jarred and unstrung after her sleepless night and the events of the morning. Miss Charteris's look and

question had roused into fresh life that sense of pain and perplexity, never long dormant, which the changes in Douglas's manner awakened in her. There was no mistaking the passionate earnestness of his tones when he had offered his help, and then in a moment some blighting chill seemed to fall between them. She could not help seeing that there were many times when he deliberately avoided her, or if he did speak, it was in a cold constrained way that was more wounding than silence. She tried to cling to her poor woman's refuge of pride, declaring that it was nothing to her if her cousin Douglas had grown changeable, seeking to exorcise those haunting doubts and questionings by refusing to acknowledge them; but the dull weary aching was there, though she might refuse to admit it. All the afternoon, through the endless discussions of dress and scene and grouping, this debate, to which there could be no conclusion, had gone on. She had resisted all Dallas's entreaties that she would take some part in the *tableaux*. She was tired, she said;

she would never be able to stand still, or else she would stiffen into a wooden image, as she had done on the solitary and memorable occasion when she had had her photograph taken. Dallas soon saw that she was disinclined, and ceased to urge her.

For some time she had been sitting thus in a sort of half dream, absorbed in her own thoughts, hardly noting the change of *tableaux* or the buzz of talk and criticism between, when the curtains opened again and disclosed a scene that would live with her while memory lasted. Yet it was the least elaborate of all, only a tall slender girl draped from head to foot in folds of glistening white, while behind her was a background of dark foliage. Her hands were slightly extended, as if she were feeling her way somewhat uncertainly in the gloom; on her uplifted face, framed in the loose falling hair, was a look that was hardly joy, nor even wonder—a strange, solemn, waking rapture. For a moment Adair hardly recognised her sister. It was the ideal Kilmeny, the heroine of that most ethereal of all the

poems of the supernatural, the lovely girl, pure in soul as fair in face, at the moment of her return to earth once more, after spending long years in the unseen realms of faëry.

“When many a long day had come and fled,
When grief grew calm and hope was dead,—
Late, late in one gloaming when all was still,
When the fringe was red on the westland hill,
The wood was sere, the moon on the wane,
The reek o’ the cot hung ower the plain,
Like ane little wee cloud in the world its lane,
When scarce was remembered Kilmeny’s name—
Late, late in a gloaming Kilmeny came hame,”

read Dallas, in a deep melodious voice, that struck on Adair’s ear like music.

Suddenly Elfie’s hands dropped, the mystic rapture vanished from her face: it was no longer the living essence of the poem, the embodiment of its exquisite conception, that stood before them, but a pale, frightened-looking girl. The curtains were instantly drawn. “Kept her standing too long, poor thing.” “Wonderful expression!” “Most effective scene yet!” “Who is she?”—were the murmurs that went round, while Adair sat feeling as if a cold

hand had been laid on her heart. Involuntarily her gaze had followed her sister's, and she had seen Dallas change his position to one where Elfie apparently could no longer see him, and with him that transfiguring look had gone from her face, as the light vanishes off still waters when a cloud passes over the moon.

Adair had little time to think of it, however, for presently Dallas came hurriedly round to Isabel, who was sitting next her, saying—

“Pity the sorrows of a hapless stage-manager, Miss Earlstoun. For some reason, or no reason, Lady Hermione objects at the last moment to be the ‘fair corpse.’ Will you come to the rescue? At least, it is a very easy part. You have only to keep your eyes shut—if that is any inducement.”

For a second Isabel deliberated. Fanchette had taken nearly half an hour to dress her hair. However novel and becoming the style might be, it was scarcely suitable for a mediæval corpse. She glanced round; a sudden thought struck her.

“Adair would make a far better corpse

than I ; that sounds rather gruesome, but it is true. You are paler, and you have on a white gown already, which would always save some time. Yes, do go, Adair, or those good people will be getting impatient."

"This is the last, we could drop it altogether ; perhaps they have had enough now," said Dallas, not wishing to urge Adair further after the evident disinclination to take part in the *tableaux* which she had already shown.

"Oh, that would be a great pity. 'Kilmeny' was very good. Elfie has taken us all by surprise, but I think this should be even more effective. Do go, Adair ; it is really not such great trouble after all."

"All the same, Miss Earlstoun is not inclined to undertake it herself," laughed Dallas, as he hurried Adair off. "I am very sorry to have let you in for this, for I am afraid you do not care for it."

"I was in a lazy mood to-day. Do you never find it a positive luxury to be disobliging occasionally ?" said Adair, with a smile.

"I should think it a luxury you very rarely get the chance of indulging in, then. Some one seems to be for ever claiming something from you," said Dallas rather hotly, recalling Isabel's message earlier in the day. "I beg your pardon, though: it is no business of mine, and I have certainly no right to speak, seeing I am doing the very same thing; but if it is not speaking evil of dignities," with a laugh, "I should think your cousin takes the loan of her friends pretty thoroughly."

The last tableau was taken from a ballad of the Yarrow, "The Gay Goss-hawk,"—the only one associated with that stream of sorrow which has not a tragic ending. A lady separated from her true knight by a feud as bitter as that between Capulet and Montague, feigns death like the hapless Juliet, in spite of the very searching test suggested by "her cruel step-minnie"—the dropping of boiling lead upon her breast. At her dying request, she is carried to St Mary's Kirk on Yarrow; and there she is found by her lover, who has been duly warned by the omniscient

“Gay Goss-hawk,” which gives its name to the ballad.

A narrow space had been screened in with dark hangings, and these, with the twinkling light of the tapers on the richly decorated altar, threw into strong relief the white-draped couch on which Adair lay. With her hands crossed upon her breast, her eyes closed, her features still and rigid, she was like some lovely marble image carved upon a tomb, save for the warm rich flood of loosened hair that rippled over the pillow. Douglas, as the knightly lover, was bending over her, trying as best he might not to look his part only too well. He would fain have followed Lady Hermione’s example when he found who was to be substituted for her ; but it would have seemed utterly absurd to do so, even had it not been too late. He could hardly trust himself to look at the fair white face before him. Surely it was very white and strangely still ! In the few moments that the curtains were withdrawn, he forgot all about the audience ; ghastly stories of simulated death prov-

ing a frightful reality thronged upon his over-excited fancy. As those brief seconds seemed to stretch interminably out, Adair's face to his imagination grew death-like; the gentle rise and fall of the chest appeared to cease, the hands clasped over it were stiffening. What if those dear eyes would never open on him again? The horror of the idea took absolute possession of him; he could bear it no longer. The curtains had fallen amid a clamour of applause, but he did not notice it.

"Adair," he whispered; "Adair, for my sake, open your eyes," stooping a little nearer. How far a human voice may follow a departing soul on its unknown path who may say; but even had the spirit been indeed hovering on that dim borderland, it seemed as if the agony of love and longing in those few whispered words must have called it back. Adair opened her eyes, she raised her head slightly, and the torrent of carnation colour that poured over brow and cheek and throat gave the lie to Douglas's half-frenzied fancy. If ever love looked out of human eyes, it was looking on

her now from those blue-grey ones fixed upon her own. She could not move; for one instant heart looked into heart: in that moment of revelation neither remembered what a frail barrier separated them from curious eyes. Suddenly it was swept away, in response to a general outcry for one more look.

“By Jove!” chuckled Lord Romer, “Earls-toun has wrought a miracle; he has brought the dead to life.”

There was a titter here and there, a spreading smile, when, with a self-possession that, under the circumstances, certainly did him credit, and a chivalrous putting aside of his own startled pang, Dallas read the closing verse of the ballad—

“She brightened like the lily flower,
Till her pale colour was gone;
With rosy cheek and ruby lip
She smiled her love upon”—

as if the apparently unexpected little disclosure had been merely a final effect. The rising laughter gave place to congratulatory plaudits, although Lord Romer rolled a watch-

ful eye upon his neighbour and executed an elaborate wink. The evening was growing late; Provost Pirret and others began to think of the ten miles' drive to Muirshiels. There was a general movement, and good-byes began to be said with the suspiciously sudden and effusive cordiality which usually attends such a parting.

"Good night—Kilmeny," said Dallas, holding Elfie's hand. "What did you think of my Kilmeny, Miss Adair? I confess to being quite proud of it."

"It really was a picture. I did not know Elfie at first, but I must own to wondering very prosaically how you had contrived that very poetic white raiment," said Adair, smiling.

Elfie laughed with childish pleasure. "To think that it was only an old Indian crape shawl of Aunt Evelyn's! But Mr Dallas put it on for me. He can do everything."

Dallas laughed, reddening a little. "There is one thing I wish I could do—I should like at least very much to try it—to paint you as

you were to-night, if it would not be too much trouble for you to sit for an hour or two now and then."

"To paint me!" said Elfie, in surprise. "Why don't you paint Adair? I am sure she is far prettier than I, and she looked so beautiful to-night all in white."

"My presumption has its limits, Kilmeny, in spite of your very unexaggerated estimate of my powers," laughed Dallas. "But seriously, I should like to try it, if it would not bore you too much, and if Mrs Charles would allow me. Please remember, though, that I can only paint as I can play, 'a little,' and do not be too critical as to results, if ever we reach any."

Mrs Charles Earlstoun was only too delighted to give the desired permission. She was in the highest good humour as she gathered her little flock round her. Adair had been magnanimously forgiven, although with a little better management she might surely have secured more than a paltry fifteen pounds. That fifteen pounds had sadly embittered the

evening to poor Mrs Charles at first. She had mentally contrasted it with very fresh evidence of wealth and luxury, and unconscious Mr Earlstoun would have been greatly surprised could he have known the sentiments his little sister-in-law was entertaining towards him. If he remembered Adair's request half an hour after it had been made, he probably would have thought he had been very generous in giving her so much more than she had asked. However, the poor lady's sense of injury had yielded to her genuine pride and pleasure in her children. Every one had complimented her upon her daughters, with the inevitable little flattering allusions as to inherited gifts, &c., which always accompany such remarks. Even Elfie had for once had a prominent place, and had attracted admiring attention. Now here was Mr Dallas wanting to paint her picture ; and when Lord Romer came up with Agnes, protesting that it was a shame they should all be driving home, and that he had been looking forward all evening to the walk, Mrs Earlstoun's cup

of satisfaction fairly overflowed. What visions glittered before her during the short dark homeward drive may be easily imagined.

While the parting guests were being sped with extreme alacrity, Miss Charteris had gone away unobserved to her own room. It was as well that nearly every one was too absorbed for the moment to notice her, for a dark face turned livid is not a pleasant sight. For a time she sat gazing straight before her, as if that last scene were still before her eyes, her clenched hands hanging down by her sides, her wide mobile mouth closed to a narrow red streak. Suddenly the icy restraint gave way, like a feeble dam yielding before the pressure of a flood and letting loose the raging waters. To some natures a physical vent for emotion is an absolute need. She seemed wholly mastered by her passion, possessed by a fury whether of love or of hate, as she paced up and down the dim firelit room, tossing her slender arms above her head, grasping at her dusky loosened hair, like some frenzied sibyl. Cicely Charteris had tropical blood in her veins; with

her dark skin she had inherited the fiery passions of a mixed race. Douglas never could believe that she really loved him, but a very varying range of feelings are classed under that one word. Reverent, almost adoring worship, and a heated desire for possession little raised above a mere physical craving, may both be called love, as well as the most passing fancy for a pretty silly face. At first Cicely had been stung out of her semi-indifference by hurt pride and wounded vanity. She had not been blind, either, to the worldly advantages of the marriage. A sudden wave of capricious public favour had swept her up out of the sordid struggling life of an unknown actress, but she was too shrewd to overestimate her success. Who knew how long it might last? and Earlshope symbolised everything save public fame and applause that she could desire. But now everything else was swept away before this suffocating tide of baffled rage, of unappeasable hungry yearning for one such look as she had seen on Douglas's face to-night. He *did* love,

he *could* love, how well she knew now, but it was not for her! With a cry like that of some tortured wild creature, she flung herself down on the bed, and buried her face in the cool soft pillows, clutching and twisting them in her strong slender hands, while her whole body writhed as if in some paroxysm of physical pain. And she had thought the poor sham he had offered her was his love, while all the time his heart had been in this girl's keeping!

"I will have it though I tear it from her!" tightening her grasp as if it were already under her hand. "I will never let him go—never. If I cannot have his love, she shall not. If my heart must be empty, I can wring theirs. He is mine — mine — mine! Once away from her, he will love me, he *must* love me. Oh, Douglas, you will surely love me a little, only a little, for I love you, I love you, if —oh, God help me!—I do not hate you;" and she buried her face deeper, trying to choke down the hysterical sobbing into which the broken gasping words had passed, though her

eyes were dry and burning. The frantic outburst passed as rapidly as a tropical hurricane. The sobs died away, she lay still for a little as if exhausted, and the tension of her frame was gradually relaxed. The long twists of her loosened hair lay spread out over the pillow like so many coiling snakes. Suddenly she sprang up, and lit the candles on each side of the long old-fashioned mirror, saying to herself with a curious little smile, "I thought I had got over my tempests; it is as well they don't last long, or I might kill myself or some other one before I knew—the latter most likely."

Taking another candle in her hand, she held it aloft, and stood looking at herself long and earnestly. Was she comparing herself with that white recumbent figure, that pure pale profile, which had power to kindle the love-light in those blue-grey eyes, where it had never yet burned for her? Behind her the fire had died down to a mass of flameless embers, a lurid background whose reflection in the mirror seemed to surround her figure

with a dull red glow. The light fell on the gleam of gold amid her dark disordered hair, and glittered on the oriental embroideries of her dress. Her eyes flashed. "They have to reckon with me yet," she said, putting down the candle. Then with a swift change of mood, she snatched it up, and held it high again—"I would make a good Medea in this gown, if some one would revive the classic tragedy; and," with a laugh, "I think I could do the part justice!"

CHAPTER XV.

AUGUST had waned into September. The birds were getting wild, and the sportsmen, except the most inveterate, did not object to an off-day now and then. Expeditions were got up to Melrose, to Abbotsford, to Dryburgh, to all the "places of interest" as guide-books call them, far and near, though what special interest they had for most of the Earlshope party it would have been hard to say. Lady Hermione could not understand why such a fuss should be made about Scott, his books were so dull; she had never been able to read one of them. For her

"The charm of forest scenes decayed,
And pastoral melancholy,"

had no existence. Yarrow was emphatically
"but a river bare, that glides the green hills

under," and lone St Mary's a very uninteresting sheet of water, on which she gazed with lack-lustre eyes—"What went ye out for to see?" stamped on every feature.

Douglas very rarely accompanied them on those excursions. He would laughingly excuse himself, saying that he had five years' absence to make up for, and he won at least the golden opinions of the head-keeper by his unabated devotion to the moors. "It pits some heart in a man to work for a young gentleman that kens what sport is, like Maister Dooglas," Armstrong would say. "As for the Laird himsel', though he nicht come out wi' his gun whiles, I doot if he kent a pairtrick frae a pee-weet, puir gentleman."

"Armstrong thinks me a hopeless case," said Dallas one afternoon in the Old Manse garden. "I met him coming across here, and he shook his head over me, more in sorrow than in anger evidently, and said, 'Eh, sir, an' ye're goin' to waste this bonnie day *pentin'*.' I can't in any way convey the contempt he put into that one word *pentin'*. For the

moment I felt myself a very despicable creature indeed. That any rational being should *pent* when he might shoot is, I suppose, an unfathomed mystery to him."

Looking back on those dreamy September days in the old orchard where Dallas had set up his easel, Adair sometimes felt as if she must have been lulled into a sort of sleep. Sometimes her mother or Agnes joined them, but generally the three were left to themselves; but whether talking, or silent as they often were, each was living in a separate world, and unconsciously giving to every word or look the colouring of their own hopes and wishes. To Dallas these were halcyon days, and as they slipped by he gave Armstrong more and more reason to groan in spirit over his falling away. He had a strong artistic bent, and very considerable technical skill, but it was no easy task to catch the haunting expression in Elfie's wistful eyes—the Kilmeny look, as he called it—but the more it baffled him, the more keenly interested he grew in his work and in the subject too. He exerted himself to rouse and

interest her, to bring the soul into her eyes as he said to himself, and encouraged her to talk in her quaint simple fashion in return. But he had to confess that his work would probably have been better, and would certainly have progressed more rapidly, had he been able to concentrate all his thoughts on Kilmeny. It was hard to do that with Adair sitting by, sometimes joining in the talk, sometimes watching Elfie with that unconscious look of hovering protecting love, which had struck and touched him so much when he had seen the sisters together at first. Often she would sit silent, busy apparently with her own thoughts, a sweet, serious, abstracted look on her face. What those thoughts might be who could guess? but perhaps Dallas was hardly to be blamed if by degrees he ventured to interpret them according to his own desires. The unexpected little revelation on the evening of the *tableaux* had come on him like a sudden shock at the time. Till then it had never occurred to him that Douglas had any warmer interest in Adair than the friendly cousinly

relation which existed between them. But startling as it had been at the moment, the effect had rapidly lessened. Douglas showed not the least desire for his cousin's society : if they spoke together, it was only a few easy careless words, and ere long Dallas had almost wholly persuaded himself that he had entirely overrated the little incident. The curtain had been unexpectedly raised, they had been taken by surprise, and to his fancy their very natural confusion had seemed something much deeper. Nothing is easier than to convince ourselves of the truth of what we are more than willing to believe : what hosts of excellent reasons muster themselves and march in the direction of our desires ! The reins once given to hope and love, they travelled fast and far. Visions of the future were before him : a noble wife, a true helpmate—what might a man not be and do with those sweet eyes shining on him, that warm heart, that brave spirit to urge him on ? Why might it not be ? he thought, gazing at the unconscious girl dreaming her own dreams, while the autumn sunlight fall-

ing through the yellowing leaves above played like a smile over her abstracted face. She was longing for a wider, fuller life; that at least he could give her, and a happier one too, God helping him, if only——And roused from her own thoughts by the very silence, Adair would look up with a little guilty start and flush of consciousness, and Dallas would turn back to Elfie, his dark eyes glowing, every pulse throbbing. Could it be? was he mad in his presumption, or might he dare to hope?

“The open air is evidently not the best place for working. Whether is your task or mine progressing more rapidly?” said Adair one day with a laugh, when thus suddenly brought back to reality, and glancing with a smile from the sewing lying in her lap to Dallas’s suspended brush.

He laughed. “Please, don’t imagine I am idle. I am engaged in the weighty task of criticising my own work, or trying to do it. I wish you would come to my help, for I have lost confidence in my judg-

ment, and in my own eyes too, I think. I have worked so long at the face, that I really cannot make up my mind about it. It is a just punishment on me, Kilmeny"—turning to Elfie—"for attempting what is, I am afraid, beyond my powers. When I rashly proposed painting you, I had no idea you would have given me so much trouble."

Elfie started back as if some one had struck her. The old look of bewildered fear clouded her face. "What have I done? Oh, I didn't mean it—I didn't mean it, indeed!"

"My dear child, you don't imagine I meant you? My poor little Kilmeny," said Dallas, in genuine distress; "why, what a sensitive child you are!"—feeling the nervous thrill through the hand he was holding in a firm gentle clasp. "Did you really think I was blaming you? That was not very kind of you"—with a smile. "I was blaming my own stupidity for attempting what I am not fit for."

"I couldn't bear to think I had been a

trouble to you," said Elfie, still rather tremulously; then suddenly looking up, "I would do anything for you"—in a whisper.

"My dear child, I think you would," said Dallas very kindly, pressing her hands.

"Well, Miss Adair"—turning back to the easel—"kill me and put me out of my pain. I am ready to bear anything now; no condemnation could be more crushing than this silence."

Adair had been standing in startled silence before the picture. The figure was merely sketched in against the dark background; only the face and neck and the cloud of loose hair were painted with any degree of finish. As Dallas had said, he might be called away any day, and if he could only catch the expression of the face, the rest might be worked up afterwards. To Adair, Elfie's face, with that strange new *awakening* look on it, which had already so thrilled her, seemed all the more striking, looking out from amid its shadowy indefinite surroundings. It was a child's face no longer.

Elfie came up and looked from the picture to Dallas. "Am I really like that?"

"Yes, I think you are—just now," glancing at the canvas. "No; it is quite gone again: you would need half-a-dozen portraits, Kilmeny"—as a pleased smile replaced the "Kilmeny look," and the girl said with a sort of innocent satisfaction, "I never thought I looked so nice."

"Do you never look in the glass, Kilmeny?" laughed Dallas, lifting a brush and hovering longingly over the eyes.

"Oh, don't touch it; you will spoil it!" exclaimed Adair impulsively, putting her hand on his arm.

Dallas looked from her to the picture. "It does not please you? Don't be afraid to tell me. I know only too well what an ineffectual attempt it is."

"On the contrary, I think it was the very likeness that silenced me. And yet it seems a new Elfie; it is hardly 'the child,' as I have called her so long. I must not do so any longer"—with a doubtful sort of laugh.

Dallas covered the canvas, and began putting his things together in sympathetic silence. He thought he knew what was troubling Adair, and what had at first so curiously interested him in Elfie,—the strange mingling in her nature of the woman and the child. New powers were awaking, and yet there was that indefinable impalpable something lacking which nullified them all. No; he feared that she would always be “the child”; and yet, what an attractive lovable creature she was! he said to himself, as Elfie’s look and her whispered words came back to him.

“We may surely count on you at Earls-hope to-night?” he said to Adair, as they went up the garden. “You have quite forsaken us of late.”

“Yes; we are all coming to swell the mob.”

“Then how many dances may I hope for?” holding her hand, and with more pleading in his voice than perhaps he knew.

“I must not promise; I must only come in as an afterthought. Muirshiels will expect

every man to do his duty to-night"—drawing her hand away with a laugh.

"Hasna Mr Dallas got through wi' that pentin' job yet?" inquired Saunders, as the gate closed. He was clipping the beech hedge—a labour of love with him—and had responded with a sort of protesting grunt to Dallas's passing greeting. "Deed it seems to me a peety that a man should pit by so muckle o' his God-gi'en time on a bit pictur', when they'll tak' your likeness for a saxpence in Muirshiels. To be sure, when folk hae clean naething to do, they maun be sore pit to it whiles to get through the day; but for ma pairt, I'd rather see him aff wi' his gun like Mr Dooglas than pinglin' here wi' his pents."

"Have you no pity for the poor grouse, Saunders? There are plenty of them being shot, I am sure, without Mr Dallas slaughtering them too."

"Hoot, Miss Adair, what else are they there for? Disna the Word even speak o' the natural brute beasts made to be taken an' destroyed? an' though shootin' they bit muirfowl

is a puir enough ploy to ma thinkin', it aye gies wark to somebody. If it was even a *bonnie* pictur' that Mr Dallas was makin', but he's pentin' Miss Elfie as if the lassie were starin' at a bogle."

"What would Mr Dallas say if he heard you?" laughed Adair.

"I'm thinkin' he kens my opeenion gey weel. I took the liberty o' lookin' on the ither day when he was dabbin' awa', an' when he askit if it pleased me, I just gied him my mind on't. Ye'll ne'er find my trumpet giein' an uncertain sound;" and Saunders severed a tougher stem with a savage clip of the big shears. Matters, which had seemed to begin so propitiously, were by no means progressing as he would have had them. If he could, he would fain have given Douglas a "piece of his mind" too—a service which he was usually very ready to render to any one. "The lad's clean gyte," he muttered to himself, as Adair left him,—"*awa' bleezin' at they bit birds on the hills, an' lettin' that lang pentin' fellow steal awa' his bonnie doo*

here at his ease ; for it canna be for Miss Elfie, puir lamb, he comes here, though he maks sic a wark wi' her."

" ' Kilmeny, Kilmeny, where have you been ? ' "

quoted Adair, with a laugh that had a ring of pain in it, when in answer to some question Elfie had started and replied all astray. " I was only thinking," she added dreamily.

The sisters were together in the big bare attic room which they shared. Adair was brushing out Elfie's long soft hair, while the girl sat gazing with unseeing eyes into the dim little glass before her.

" Only thinking ? " A day ago Adair would have said that she knew her little sister's thoughts as she knew her own ; but looking at the face reflected in the blurred old glass, she felt she dare not say so now. The chill sense of dread which had been suddenly revived by the look on the pictured face earlier in the day now came over her again. During the last few days she had all but forgotten her vague alarm in what she was now

ready to call her selfish absorption in her own dreams. Since the evening of the *tableaux* she had hardly seen Douglas. She had avoided Earlshope, sending Agnes in her stead whenever she could ; but somehow her doubts had ceased to torment her. She had seemed to be floating down a broad stream of content. Douglas loved her. She whispered the words to herself over and over. If she doubted it, she must doubt her very senses. She would trust him, then. Yes ; she *could* trust him. Whatever might now be keeping him silent and apart from her would all be made plain. "Douglas, Douglas, tender and true"—her life seemed set to the music of these words. All her little world thrilled with them. She heard them in the murmur of the Rule, in the whisper of the fading leaves, in the sweet broken cadence of the robin's autumn song.

Could it be that her little sister had been caught away, too, into that fairy-land ? she asked herself while she hastily dressed, glancing every now and then at Elfie sitting

very erect in her white frock, with her hands folded. She looked like a child who, having been dressed rather too early, has been bidden to sit very still and not spoil its clothes; but save for its serious simplicity, there was nothing childlike in the abstracted face. Was it true of her too—

“Kilmeny had been she knew not where,
Kilmeny had seen what she could not declare”?

How then would she bear the return to earth again? Did Mr Dallas know what he was doing? Adair asked herself, in a hot sudden flame of pain and anger; and she, blind dreaming fool that she had been, had sat by day after day and had let it go on unheeded. Elfie was “the child” to him, on whom he might lavish petting and pretty names. He meant it well, no doubt, but to him it was nothing more than a fanciful friendship. But what was it—what was he himself to Elfie? There was something more than the girl’s former vague fancies stirring in the soft eyes—beautiful eyes they were to Adair, like some of the

quiet pools of the Rule when the faint stars were shining down into their brown depths.

It could not be otherwise. With a rush that cruel conviction, against which she had battled so long, came over Adair—the bitter consciousness that Elfie was set aside from the common ways, the common joys, of life; that that pure heart and gentle nature might awaken pity, but never love. Adair's heart filled with a passion of remorseful tenderness, almost fierce in its mingled strength and helplessness—for what could she do now to shield her? Speak to Mr Dallas? Impossible! and yet—

“Are you going to spend all night dressing, Adair?” exclaimed Agnes, thrusting her pretty head, “curled like an Assyrian bull,” round the door. “Why, is that all? I expected something stupendous after such a length of time.”

“Now I like that! When did you begin that wonderful erection, Aggie? It does credit to your patience, I must say. As to my gowns, it is merely a choice of evils just

now, and though time may be money, no amount of it will transform an old frock into a new one. I am ready now, though," snatching at gloves and wraps, hardly knowing what she said in being thus suddenly recalled from her visionary perplexities.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE dance that night at Earlshope was very much like all similar gatherings where the company is drawn from such different classes. The "mixed multitude" disported itself in its own fashion, enjoyed itself heartily, if a trifle boisterously, after the first sensations of awe had worn off, and criticised the selecter few, who in turn regarded the gambols of the multitude with somewhat ostentatious amusement. Sir Claud danced the first dance with Isabel, and the whisper went round unchecked that the much-talked-of prospective engagement was now an accomplished fact ; but to all appearance Douglas might have been the candidate for the suffrages of Muirshiels, from the zeal with which he devoted himself to its fair *bourgeoises*. To Agnes's deep but secret dis-

appointment, Lord Romer followed his example, and apparently found inexhaustible delight and diversion in the artless conversation of Miss Minnie Pirret and her compeers. The enjoyment was apparently mutual, for as the little man circled by, embracing, sometimes with considerable difficulty, one brilliantly dressed, high-coloured damsel after another, an atmosphere of breathless giggling seemed always to envelop him and his blushing partner. Adair had at first been in no mood for enjoyment. Dallas had found her *distracte*, and almost brusque, in her manner to him; and his protecting care for Elfie, which had now become quite a habit, seemed almost to annoy her, instead of, as usual, awakening that quick, pleased, grateful look he loved to see. But sheer youthfulness after a time had its way. Adair loved dancing, as all girls do, or ought to do, and in spite of her two-and-twenty years was still inclined to think more of the dance than of her partners, save perhaps one. Large dances were very rare festivities at Earlshope, or anywhere else

in such a neighbourhood, and she had never before danced on a waxed floor, nor to such music. Wings seemed to have been given to her feet, and it was perhaps hardly surprising if after a time, amid the lights and the flowers and the gay dresses, above all with the rapid even motion that set all her young pulses bounding, her foreboding anxiety imperceptibly lessened. Elfie looked so simply, childishly happy when dancing or looking on merely, that for the moment her fears appeared overstrained and fanciful. As the hours passed, however, the glamour began to wear away with the first excitement. Her partners all said the same thing. The marked rhythm of waltz after waltz beat upon her ears till her very brain was wearied; the lights dazzled her; the room was getting too hot—her very feet were tired. No; she would not dance any more. Dallas and Elfie had disappeared; but she hardly thought of them, for one couple enchained all her attention. As one partner after another had come up, the unconfessed expectation that surely

Douglas would ere long come to claim her had been turned to disappointment time after time. She had been rather amused by his assiduous attentions to the provincial belles; and had they been on the old easy cousinly terms, she might probably have upbraided him afterwards with the possible results of his various reckless flirtations. She had seen him dance more than once with Lady Hermione, but this was different. Her heart seemed to stand still for a moment when Douglas passed her with Miss Charteris in his arms. The room was thinning fast, there was no longer the bewildering crowd of whirling figures to distract the sight, and more eyes than hers followed the couple down the long room. In spite of his somewhat heavy build, Douglas was an excellent dancer—strong and swift and steady. He neither used his partner as a weapon of offence or defence, a buffer or a battering-ram, as is the way of some men; while Cicely, in her clouds of orange tulle, seemed rather to float round with him than to dance. Her head, with one or

two great yellow alamanda blossoms amid the coils of dark hair, was all but resting on his shoulder, her face was upturned to his. More than once Adair had mentally pronounced Miss Charteris to be hardly even good-looking; but now she recognised to the full the luring fascination of those wonderful eyes and that expressive face. Why need she care? she tried to say to herself, and yet she was conscious of a faint sickening sense of pain as they passed and repassed her, and the fair head bent nearer to the dark witchery of Cicely's face, while the music rose and fell in waves of sound half sweet, half mournful.

"I did not think you could dance so well, Douglas, or I should not have let you waste so much time on those Dulcineas," said Cicely, as the music stopped.

"I am glad I can do something to please you," said Douglas, with rather a manufactured laugh. "There, they are going to begin again; do you care for another turn?"

"What an idea! What do you think those

good people would say? No; why don't you go and dance with your cousin? She is looking quite forlorn, poor girl. I have been in doubt to-night whether it is to her or to Undine that Mr Dallas is devoting himself, but even he has forsaken her. Yes, go; I really mean it."

Douglas looked at her for a moment. "Very well, if you bid me," he said, with an odd sort of smile, and walked straight across the room to Adair.

"Won't you have a turn with me, Adair?" he said, in something of the old coaxing boyish voice. "The night is nearly over, and I don't think you and I have danced together since the days when we used to caper round the old schoolroom." Adair was half inclined to refuse, but something in his voice made her yield.

"Have you observed how I have profited by your lessons? Maxwell ought to give me a testimonial for my exertions in his cause to-night. I am sure no one has done his duty more exhaustively than I, and ex-

haustingly I may add, for some of those young women were uncommonly heavy in hand. If England, or any other place or person, expects anything further from me to-night, they deserve to be disappointed for being over-exacting." Douglas kept talking on in a nervous excited way until the music fairly began, and then he hardly spoke again. It was Miss Charteris's turn to watch now, her eyes gleaming over the big slow-waving black fan, while she talked to the little group that invariably gathered round her. Adair was quite content to be silent; it was like gliding on in some beatific dream. "I wish this could go on for ever," said Douglas, in a hard abrupt way, very unlike the conventional utterance of that stereotyped ball-room phrase. He brought her back to her seat, and went away without another word. The young man's face was white and his hands trembling, as he made his way through the streams of departing guests. He went to his room, and throwing himself into a chair, sat staring into the

darkness. What was he to do? What was right and what was wrong? By his rashness he had brought himself into a relation that it seemed equally wrong to break off or to continue. To go back from his pledged word was against every tradition of his life, every instinct of his nature, and yet had he any right to force himself into this marriage from which soul and body alike revolted? If only to hold his cousin Adair in his arms for those few moments had shaken his whole being to its very centre, how was he to bear the life he was preparing for himself? Would he be doing greater dishonour to Cicely Charteris by wedding her with a lie in his hand, than by breaking faith with her, as the world would call it? If his bondage was intolerable now, when freedom was not yet impossible, what would it be when it was made irrevocable, and the only escape from it would be through sin and shame? Sleep was impossible, with the fever of baffled longing firing every vein. He made no attempt even to seek it, but sat carrying

on the dreary endless debate, while the brief remnant of the night passed, and the faint bluish light of earliest dawn began to steal in, cold and wan. The dead heavy silence of the sleeping house, the four enclosing walls, seemed to stifle him. He threw open the window, swung himself out, and crossing the Rule, went right up the hillside, going where he neither knew nor cared, walking faster and faster over sear grass and stunted heather, in the dim sickly light of earliest morning, which, as yet, was only morning because it was no longer night. How far he went in that vain effort to outstrip thought and leave care behind he did not know, till, mounting one wavy crest higher than those around, lo ! before him was a wonder that compelled even his dulled senses to gaze in awe.

Far away in the eastern heavens, beyond the grey sea of rolling hills and valleys, the "awful rose of dawn" was slowly unfolding its burning heart, its glowing petals seeming to be slowly wafted upwards, as tiny flakes of floating cloudlet caught the light. Douglas

had seen the sun rise often enough before, when another blazing day had leapt into being the instant the fiery disc of the sun had rimmed the horizon on African *veldt* or on the wide Indian plains, but he had never seen it rise in such solemn majesty as now. The dim world of hills spread out on every hand, while night still lingered amid the deep narrow glens. Overhead was the vast arch of sky, awful in its clear calm serenity as infinity itself, colourless save for the burning glory of the east. Fronting that radiance, Douglas felt as the man of the desert may have done, when, in the face of a still more terrible brightness, he was bidden to take off the shoes from his feet, for he stood upon holy ground. The furious resistance of the dark hours slowly died down, as the crimson fires of dawn consumed away; life, so all engrossing, so all important, seemed here but a speck of time after all. To keep his word was at least a plain duty. The passionate claim for personal happiness grew fainter; right and wrong stood out as they may do before

shrinking eyes in the white light of eternity, coloured no longer by hope or fear or eager desire.

The sun came up. The first long level ray of light struck the hill-top and the solitary watcher with its arrowy brightness. The new day had fairly begun. Douglas rose from the frosty grass, conscious for the first time of the deadly chill, and of a weariness of mind and body such as he had never known before. He looked vaguely round, wondering for a moment where he was, and then turned his back upon the sunrise, feeling as if he were leaving all the brightness of life behind him, and struck off across the hills towards the Rule Water. Yes, a new day had begun. He would put an end to a tacit deception he should never have allowed; he would see his father that morning, and strengthen his resolve by every outward compulsion he could give it; but the present misery he could not, and he would not, endure longer. At least he had not in words told Adair of his love, if he could not always control voice or face. Well, she would forget

him. What right had he, after all, to his presumptuous confidence that she loved him in return. She would forget him for some better and happier man—Dallas; but here human nature rebelled. He might resign hope, but willingly to picture another in the place that perhaps might have been his was too much.

It was still early morning when he reached the glen once more, and the very power of thought was dulled by fatigue. Instead of crossing the stream higher up on the rocks, as he had done before, he found himself instinctively going towards the bridge. It did not matter; no one would be astir yet. As he passed the Old Manse, he looked up at the window which he knew was Adair's. How often in those far-away days, that seemed to belong to some other life now, he used to send a handful of gravel flying up to it, as a signal for her to come out and join in some of their boyish fun. He could almost fancy he saw the blind withdrawn, as it used to be, and the bright eager face appearing. But it remained closely drawn; there was no

sign of life about the house, though the gate in the high wall was standing slightly ajar. He pushed it open, and stood looking in on the trim sunny garden, where the long shadows were lying across the dewy turf. He was bidding good-bye to the Eden of his youth, and the paradise of desire never seems so fair as in the moment of final renunciation. Turning away at last, he went on towards the bridge, his eyes on the ground, the darkness within all the deeper for that flash of memory. As he reached it, some slight sound made him look up, and there before him was Adair, with the morning sunlight shining on her clear face, her sweet eyes, her smiling parted lips.

Like straws in a torrent, every resolve vanished. Every consideration of duty and honour that had seemed but a short hour ago so potent and binding, was swept from his mind. He saw nothing, thought of nothing, but that his love was there, smiling on him. Sheer exhaustion of mind and body, after the long struggle, may have had their part in his sud-

den utter failure ; but the strong curb of will once broken, all the love of a lifetime, all the pent-up passion that had only been gathering strength during those weeks of silence and repression, now broke forth, and would no longer be restrained. The heart of each had been filled with thoughts of the other all the night through : now in the morning light they stood face to face.

One look revealed all. He was by her side, holding her hands.

“ Adair, I love you, I love you, I love you ! ” Douglas found himself repeating almost wildly. What more he said he did not know ; but in another moment she was gathered into his arms, and the fair face, lily-like no longer, was hidden on his breast. In that brief intoxicating moment the past and the future alike had vanished, as he poured out all the love that had been a very “ fire in his bones ” while he had kept silence.

“ Adair,” he pled, “ let me hear it from your own lips once, only once. Oh, my love, I can never tell you how I love you ! Not my heart

only, but my whole being, has been hungering, craving, crying out for you. I can hardly believe that this is real—that it is not one of the dreams I have had so often, and that I will waken only to find my heart and my arms empty. Tell me yourself, love; let me hear you say you love me!”

“Do you think I need?” said Adair, with a swift upward glance from shy lovely eyes, and a low laugh of utter heart-full happiness. A hush of silent rapture fell on wind and woods and water. For two hearts, two lives, it was the culminating moment of all possible earthly joy—

“The moment eternal—just that and no more,
When ecstasy’s utmost we clutch at the core,
While cheeks burn, arms open, eyes shut, and lips
meet,”—

and in that instant Douglas’s punishment had begun. Adair felt the sudden shudder pass over him, the slight relaxing of the clasp in which she had been so closely held.

A heavy foot sounded on the road. Douglas’s arms dropped by his sides. Adair was

gazing down into the water, as a labourer came down the road on his way to his daily work in the Earlschope woods. He forgot to make his clumsy salutation, while he stared in surprise at the young laird. Little as Douglas was thinking of such matters, it occurred to him for the first time that, hatless and in his evening clothes as he was, he must present rather a singular spectacle at that hour in the morning. Adair looked at him too, with a dawning anxiety. Till now she had never noticed his unusual appearance ; it was Douglas—that was enough.

“ I am like a poor belated owl, surprised by the daylight ; the sooner I fly away now and hide myself, the better,” he said, trying to speak easily, as the woodman tramped slowly away, looking back over his shoulder as he went. “ Somehow I could not sleep last night, nor even stay in the house. I have been scouring the hills since I don’t know when, which accounts for my disreputable aspect, which seems to have been quite too much for Webster.”

As those crunching footfalls on the gravelly road slowly grew fainter, Adair thought of her own hours of weary tossing wakefulness. Doubts and fears had gone with the darkness. Weeping might endure for a night, but joy, full, unspeakable, bewildering, had come in the morning.

“Adair,” said Douglas, and she turned, startled at the change in his voice. “My love, for I have a right to call you that—my one and only love, whatever may come,” taking her hands, and unconsciously pressing them hard against his breast, while he looked down into her eyes,—“I had no right to speak to you now as I have done. I will come back soon—very soon, and tell you all; I cannot do it now. Perhaps when you hear all, you will forgive me; till then you will trust me. Adair—trust me a little longer.”

Adair looked at him with brave steadfast eyes, though her face had paled. Then in a whisper she said, “I *love* you, Douglas—does not that include all?” and turned swiftly and left him.

Douglas let her go, and went down to the water-side and flung himself down among the long grass and bracken; and if ever mortal man could have prayed with a remorseful soul of old that God might

“Send a sudden angel down
To seize me by the hair, and bear me far,
And fling me deep in that forgotten mere,”

it was Douglas Earlstoun at that moment. If that clear shallow water, laughing by him, had been but deep and strong enough to have carried him away, he might have been tempted to take judgment into his own hands then and there. What had he done? A chill sickening horror crept over him as he began to realise it. He was guilty of the cruellest, most dastardly baseness; he had surprised a pure proud girl into owning her love for him—her love that should have been the crown of his life, but that he had no right to ask nor to take, pledged as he was in word and honour, as far as man could be, to another woman. Good God! how had he done it? how had he been so left to

himself? Memory would not supply the links between that moment on the hill-top, when he seemed to have at last got the victory, and this abyss of dishonour into which he was plunged. Now the fair morning was turned to blackness around him, the murmur of the Rule swelled to a deafening roar, echoing the inward voice remorselessly denouncing shame, shame upon him. Shame! and he had never thought to know the meaning of that word. He buried his face deeper amid the dank river-side grass in a very agony of self-loathing. If he could but hide himself and his shame out of his own sight, much more from those dear eyes before which it must all be spread only too soon. How would they look on him then?

One thing, and one only, was clear to him when he rose at last,—he must see Cicely at once, and, at whatever cost, break his engagement with her. There was no longer any question of right or wrong, honour or dishonour,—all that he had put wholly out of his power. But he would not put Adair to

further shame. It would be bitter enough for her, when he came to make his confession, but at least he would make it as a free man: he would not add to his sin against her, it was black enough as it was.

Douglas reached the house without meeting any one except a servant, who, like the woodman, stared at his haggard face and disordered dress. Breakfast was almost over when he went into the dining-room. Miss Charteris was not there, but he had hardly expected her, as she rarely appeared for that meal. Assured of that, he scarcely noticed what went on. Lord Romer was causing a great deal of amusement by imitating some of his partners of the previous night,—the coy, the arch, or the gushing Miss, and the manner in which each had responded to his tender speeches.

“For shame, Lord Romer!” said Lady Lormore at last, wiping her eyes; “you are too hard on the poor girls. It is downright shabby,—as bad as ‘kiss and tell.’”

Lord Romer smiled knowingly, as much as to say that on that point he could have some-

thing to say also. "I must give you one more,—positively the last, but it is the best of all. Did you notice a blowsy girl in a bright blue gown?"

"They were all blowsy, and there were so many blue gowns."

"It does not matter then. I am not very clear myself which blue gown it was, but you could never guess what she said to me——" and so on.

Douglas listened with disgust, thinking it was a shame to talk girls over in that way, and wondering that the women encouraged it, when, with a pang that absolutely took his breath away, the thought occurred to him, what was this compared to what he had done?

"Come, Earlstoun," said Lord Romer, "give us your experiences now. I have been telling Maxwell that he will largely owe his seat, if ever he gets it, to your noble exertions and mine last night. I saw you were making great havoc among the rustic maidens. The recollections must be very

thrilling, for he is positively blushing over them. Had it been last night, I might have thought it a legacy from his partners, but I think the dye was permanent as a rule. Really, this is a phenomenon to be investigated," and Lord Romer elaborately adjusted his *pince-nez*.

"I evidently haven't your talent for gaining confidence, Romer," said Douglas, as coolly as he could; "it is rather humiliating perhaps, but I am afraid my partners regarded me merely as a sort of spinning-jenny of the male gender: all I could get out of them was 'Oh, thanks, I shall be ready to go on again directly,' when we stopped for a little." Did his voice sound as strange to the others as it did to his own ears? He was saved from the need of saying more by one or two rising.

"Douglas," said his father, near whom he was sitting, "I want you in the library as soon as you are ready."

If the stone hawk above the entrance-gate had made the request, Douglas could hardly have been more surprised. For his father

voluntarily to request his presence anywhere, seeing he apparently hardly ever noticed it, was a novelty indeed.

"Certainly, sir," he said, rather confusedly ; "but—but would it do a little later?" If only he might see Cicely first!

"No, it wouldn't do later," said Mr Earlstoun, with sudden irritation. "It is not often that I trouble you, is it?"

Douglas followed his father to the library, where they were joined by Mr Moncrieff, Mr Earlstoun's lawyer.

"We want your signature to these papers, Douglas," said Mr Earlstoun in the same fretful, nervous tone, turning some documents over fussily while he spoke.

"It is an important matter, Mr Earlstoun. I think Mr Douglas must hear them first," said Mr Moncrieff, dryly.

"I am sure it will be all right if you and my father are satisfied with it, Mr Moncrieff. I shall scribble you my name as often as you like," said Douglas. If only they would let him away! He was possessed by a positive

fever of dread that in some way or other Adair would learn the truth before he could himself tell her. He told himself that such a fear was absurd. Why should she be any more likely to hear it to-day than at any time during the past weeks. But he could not rid his mind of the idea.

Whether Mr Moncrieff was satisfied or not, he did not say. He only repeated more insistently, "Mr Douglas ought to hear the contents of the papers, in my opinion, Mr Earlstoun."

"Very well, then; but I don't imagine he will understand them in the least," said Mr Earlstoun. "Can you not sit down, Douglas?" sharply. "What on earth are you in such a fidget about? Surely the grouse can wait a little for one morning."

Douglas subsided into the nearest chair as resignedly as he could, apparently not noticing his father's slighting opinion of his mental powers. In a dry level voice Mr Moncrieff began to read the documents, but what they might be about Douglas could not

have told. Listen he could not; the round-about legal phraseology made no impression whatever upon his mind. As the steady monotonous flow of sound went on, interrupted merely by the crackling turning of a leaf, he was conscious only of a growing sense of dull confusion, across which would shoot every now and then the recollection of the morning's misery or the thought of what he must say by-and-by to Cicely and to Adair. Every now and then Mr Moncrieff would pause to make some explanation, and glancing keenly at him, would say, "I hope I have your attention, Mr Douglas," and he would rouse himself and try to extract some meaning from the web of words, but in vain. At last it was over. Mr Moncrieff laid the papers ready for signature.

"If you are fully prepared to sign them, Mr Douglas?" he said.

"Oh yes, it is all right, I am sure," said Douglas, hurriedly writing a big black *Douglas Earlstoun* under his father's sprawling uncertain signature wherever Mr Mon-

crieff told him to do so. Once out of the library, he was alive again. Miss Charteris had gone out alone some time ago, was all any one could tell him of Cicely. With a set, determined face, he went out in search of her.

“Douglas is not looking well,” said Mr Moncrieff, gathering up the papers.

“Isn’t he? I did not notice it,” said Mr Earlstoun. “He ought to be well, if he isn’t; he is out on the hills all day, and he has not a care in the world, I am sure.”

“Not a care in the world? I hope he has not laid up a few for himself to-day, then,” thought Mr Moncrieff, as he tied up the bundle. “The lad has something on his mind, that is easily seen. I hope he is not going Maurice’s way. If ever any one flung the best chances of life, and himself after them, to the devil, it was that poor fellow. Well, if it is not a woman, it is sure to be money, and in that case I shall hear of it soon enough. I have done my best, but it can’t go on long at this rate. Miss Isabel has some

sense ; she is provided for, at least. Maxwell is raving mad in his politics, but he'll learn sense, and he is not the spendthrift sort. I don't like the look on that lad's face. It's a pity, for he was a fine boy, was Douglas—the best of them all, I used to think. Well, 'He that will to Cupar maun to Cupar.'” Comforting himself with the pithy old proverb, Mr Moncrieff put away his papers, and, being also a zealous antiquarian out of business hours, began to discuss a recent find of stone urns with Mr Earlstoun, as if there were no subject of greater interest in the world than prehistoric drinking-ware.

CHAPTER XVII.

MISS CHARTERIS had strolled out in anything but a pleasant humour. She was very angry with Douglas for his unexpected defection of the night before, and doubtful as to the success of the little experiment she had chosen to try. She had sent Douglas to Adair at first, simply from that love of tantalising in which some natures find pleasure; but while she watched the cousins, finding a fierce satisfaction, in the midst of her own pain, in the consciousness of the suffering it was in her power to inflict, a fresh idea had occurred to her. Supposing Douglas were tempted to any revelation of his feelings, which in the circumstances was likely enough, what a crushing disclosure she had it in her power to make! What would Adair think of her *beau cousin*

then — her “Douglas, tender and true”? Cicely hummed the words to herself behind her fan with bitter savage mockery, as the unconscious pair circled by her, and she saw the dreamy happiness in the girl’s face, and the softening of Douglas’s grey eyes. “Soft eyes looked love to eyes that spake again,” but how would they look supposing her secret were divulged? All night through, between snatches of feverish sleep, she played with the thought. Dreaming or waking it haunted her, till, when she left the house after having waited in vain with some faint expectation that, after all, Douglas might seek her to make the *amende*, it had almost grown to a settled purpose in her mind. Almost before she was aware, she had taken the path that led towards the bridge. She walked slowly, smiling to herself, and making up a little bouquet as she went of the cranberry-leaves which overspread the ground like a glossy green carpet. Here and there some leaf or spray was already touched to a vivid scarlet by the morning frosts. She might tell or she might

not. It would be interesting at least to see how such a revelation would be taken in real life; she might even get an idea from it, she said to herself, retouching her bouquet and adding a fresh spray to it. Of course it would all depend upon circumstances. She would not make up her mind yet; but she soothed the fresh prick her pride had received that morning by thinking how a word from her could shatter Adair's dream-world. How would the girl take it? Only too quietly, she was afraid. There was little chance of a dramatic scene. Adair was not the sort of girl to show her feelings, but she would feel it all the same—oh yes, she would feel it. And Miss Charteris smiled again.

Circumstances apparently meant to afford her the opportunity, whether she chose to make use of it or not, for as she emerged from the woods she saw Adair crossing the bridge towards her. A note had come from Isabel in hot haste, bidding, rather than asking, "some one of you" to come over at

once to Earlshope. It was needless to send Elfie. Agnes flatly refused to go—she was cross and out of spirits; the evening had been a thorough disappointment to her. So, sorely against her will, Adair had to comply with the imperious request. To go to Earlshope seemed almost like seeking Douglas. She had promised to wait till he would come, and he might come at any moment now. Heart and brain had been in a tumult since Douglas had left her. Her face burned every time she recalled her parting words, and yet she would not have retracted them if she could. She *did* love him, how deeply the confessing of it seemed for the first time to have revealed to her; she *would* trust him. What he might have to tell her she could not imagine, nor why he should not have done so at once; but whatever it might be—with a proud lifting of her head—it could be nothing that would lessen her love or her trust or her pride in him, her brave, noble lover. He would come and tell her; till then she could afford to wait.

Instinctively she paused a little on the

bridge in spite of the urgent message, while in thought she lived over again those few bewildering moments that had changed all her life. Since that parting on that far-off summer night, she had been unconsciously waiting for this—— A laugh, trilling, musical, mirthless, rang out beside her. She turned with a sudden start, and found Miss Charteris regarding her with an amused expression.

“Did I startle you? It seems too bad to break in upon what must surely have been very pleasant dreams, but I had to make my presence known somehow.”

“You must have come up very quietly. I wonder I did not hear your steps on the bridge. It is generally a tell-tale,” said Adair, moving back a step, and feeling slightly annoyed.

“What do you call those leaves? They are very pretty,” said Miss Charteris, holding out her bouquet.

“Cranberry,” said Adair. “Yes, they are reddening early this year.”

“They are most effective. I wonder you

don't wear them," said Miss Charteris, fastening some of the glittering scarlet sprays into the lace at her throat. "Will you have some?—but, to be sure, scarlet is hardly your colour," with a glance at the ruffled warm-tinted locks round Adair's white brow. There was nothing in the words, nor any special significance in the tone or look, but somehow they conveyed a subtle sense of disparagement which Adair was quick to feel. "As for me, I need a bit of colour to light me up," went on Miss Charteris, as she arranged the leaves to her satisfaction with a rapid skilful touch. She wore a gown of tussur silk in its natural yellowish shade, falling in straight soft folds, and contrasting with the long scarf of black lace loosely knotted at her throat, and the broad black hat. The bright leaves did, as she said, "light her up," and gave fresh point to her whole appearance. The little touch of vivid colouring had all the effect of a sudden gleam of sunshine. Possibly Adair thought, with a little spice of very human if somewhat malicious pleasure, that Miss Charteris required

a little lighting up. Graceful, striking, she always was, but the darkly radiant face of the night before looked lined and sallow in the morning sunlight. Miss Charteris was too wise to have recourse to the perilous aids of rouge or powder in the uncompromising light of day, and reserved the mysteries of the art of making-up for the more flattering gaslight. "I may as well admit it. I suppose I must have been jealous, and that threw a glamour over my eyes," thought Adair to herself. Jealous!—how delightfully absurd it seemed! She could afford to laugh at her foolish fancies now, though the pang had been keen enough while it lasted.

"I was proposing to invade the Old Manse, Miss Adair," said Cicely. "It is an unheard-of hour to do such a thing, I know, but I suppose one need not be so conventional in the country. Will you let me in?"

"I have to go to Earlshepe, but my mother and sisters will be glad to see you," said Adair, uttering the necessary polite fiction, though her mind misgave her direfully as to

what Agnes's feelings might be should Miss Charteris find her in her morning-gown, and with her hair in one big rough twist, instead of its usual multitudinous loops and puffings.

“ Ah, well, perhaps I had better walk back with you—it is rather too early, I suppose ; but everybody is so flat across there to-day, I thought I would take refuge with you for a little. It is quite funny ; those good people would have gone to half-a-dozen dances in one night in town, and have been ready for another half-dozen the next, and yet here they are all declaring themselves exhausted after last night. To be sure, like the people in the Scriptures who *did* eat, they did dance, it must be confessed, which makes rather a difference. By the by, your cousin, Mr Douglas, dances very well.”

“ Yes,” said Adair, with a smile, and turning away her head a little to hide the look of shy pleasure which the very mention of that name awoke in her eyes. She could not control the quick-running blood, however, and Miss Charteris watched from under her drooped

eyelids the soft glow rising in the white curves of cheek and throat.

“Somehow I did not expect it,” she went on, with a laugh. “He looks too big and solid, I should have thought, for that sort of thing ; but he developed other unlooked-for qualities last night. I am afraid he is a sad flirt ; some one ought really to take him to task. I fear some of those bouncing Hebes, to whom he was so devoted last night, will be denouncing him as an arch - deceiver by-and-by. Poor things ! of course they don’t know the worth of those little attentions. *Le roi s’amuse.*”

“Sport to him, but death to us. Remember I am a country girl too, Miss Charteris,” said Adair, with mock gravity.

“Oh, but that is quite different. You have known him all your life, I suppose—at least I think you told me so once.”

“Yes,” said Adair, wishing Miss Charteris had chosen any other subject.

“And, of course, you are very much interested in your cousin,” with a quick glance, and the same mirthless little laugh.

Adair looked at her with haughty questioning in her lifted brows. What did she mean? After all, there was perhaps no need of taking it too seriously. She knew as little of actresses' words and ways as, with an inward laugh, Mrs Mackay did. Perhaps Miss Charteris meant no harm, but she did not choose to be catechised in this way any longer.

"Naturally we all 'take an interest' in him, as you call it," she said, as indifferently as she could. "But I am afraid I must go—indeed I ought not to have lingered so long."

"I don't think you need hurry; Miss Earls-toun did not seem in such haste, after all. Wait a moment and I shall come with you; but really one cannot help loitering here a little. I suppose it is the water that is the charm." She dropped a red sprig down into the stream, and watched it slowly drift away.

"*Apropos* of your cousin, that is a very pretty song that Undine sings. I beg your pardon, I ought not to call Miss Elfie that; but Mr Dallas calls her Kilmeny, doesn't he? and I think my name is even more appro-

priate. I must ask her to sing it to me again. It is really very pretty, is it not? especially," with a laugh, "the refrain. I suppose you think it very applicable to Mr Douglas?"

"Really, Miss Charteris," exclaimed Adair impatiently, "you compel me to say that *you* seem to take a great interest in my cousin."

"Like you, I may say too, naturally I do," said Cicely, with a dilating flash of her eyes, and in a tone that invited questioning. Adair looked at her in haughty astonished silence.

"Then you really do not know!" said Cicely, with an air of innocent surprise. "Men make such a fuss about truth and honour, but their code seems rather elastic where girls are concerned, and 'cousinly' is a word that covers a multitude of—well, sins would be perhaps too strong a word. I supposed that, as a relation, you would be admitted into the family conclave when it sat in judgment upon me, or at least that you would be informed of its decision. Since you have not, I think it is hardly fair you should be kept in the dark any longer,—it might cause misunderstanding," the slow

smile growing on the thin red lips. "I think Douglas should have told you, but since he has not I really feel I ought——"

"I do not in the least understand you, Miss Charteris," broke in Adair, in the same proud indifferent tone which had already given the final impulse to Cicely's longing to disclose her secret. "I cannot wait any longer. I know of nothing you can have to tell me that can possibly have any interest for me."

"Do not be so sure. I shall not keep you a moment. Since you are naturally interested in your cousin," a covert sneer in the low deliberate voice, "I thought of course you would be interested to hear, what I fancied you knew already, what I think you should have been told sooner,—that Douglas and I have been engaged for quite a time now." The pupils of her eyes contracted, her lips took a wider curve.

"I do not believe it," flashed out Adair, straight and direct as a blow might be delivered. Believe it! It was a lie as foolish as it was false. Believe it! with the tender

triumph of Douglas's voice still ringing in her ears, with her blood still throbbing from that straining clasp, when, heart beating against heart, he had drawn the secret of her love from her. Would Douglas, her cousin, her love, have done so if this monstrous thing were true? would he have asked her to wait, to trust him, if this was what he had to tell her? Believe it! she could have laughed in joyful scorn.

Miss Charteris laughed—a genuine laugh this time of malicious pleasure. This was better than she had expected. “You are not very complimentary. What does that imply that I am then, Miss Adair? If you did not know it, however, I do not wonder that you are surprised. I think we kept our secret wonderfully well. It is quite a tribute to our dramatic powers that you cannot believe it even when you are told. Indeed,” smiling, “I hardly think you are convinced yet. Ask Douglas himself then, if my testimony is not enough. You will take his word for it, I suppose. Speak of angels—I believe that is he

coming down through the trees, is it not? How very opportune! I shall leave him to remove your doubts, and I am sure in return he will be glad to have the congratulations of such an old friend." With another peal of airy mocking laughter, Cicely went away. She had plenty of courage, but on the whole she thought she would rather not face Douglas at that moment.

Douglas, who knew that Miss Charteris cared but little for walking, had been seeking her in the gardens, nearer the house. Not finding her there, some quick premonition of evil made him take the way towards the water-side.

Adair held hard by the rough railing for a moment, as the echoes of Cicely's laughter died away. The peaceful autumn sky flashed into jagged flames before her eyes, stream and hill and trees rocked giddily around her. She was battling for very life—the life of her love and trust—against the horrible conviction that this was no lie. Douglas's hasty steps rang hollow on the wood. She turned and faced him.

"Is—this—true?" Three words—all she

could say, but they seared like drops of molten metal. There was a dead, dreadful silence. Douglas thought he had drunk the cup of his shame and humiliation to the very dregs, but now he knew that he had but put his lips to it. In one blighting, blinding flash he saw himself and what he had done through Adair's eyes,—those eyes that were flaming now into his very soul, imploring the denial which at that moment he would have thought life itself but a trifling price to have been able to give. Little wonder that in that day when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed, men shall call upon the rocks and hills to crush and cover them. Better any destruction than to have our wrong-doing spread out naked and bare before our own eyes and those of eternal truth. Douglas stood speechless. With a low moaning cry, Adair clasped her hands over her eyes as if to shut out some hateful sight. He could speak now.

“Adair!” he cried desperately, springing forward; “hear me—let me speak——”

“Don’t speak to me—don’t touch me!” she cried, in a hard jarring voice, shuddering away from him, and then she turned and walked swiftly up the glen towards the hills, seeking that first need of a stricken soul,—solitude.

Douglas stood motionless till long after she had disappeared from his sight, and then he slowly followed in the direction she had taken. On those bare hillsides a single moving figure can be seen a long distance off. He soon caught sight of her. She was going towards the Misty Law, a great, broad-backed, brown hill—going up, up, up, driven by the goad of misery, at a frantic speed, which even he could not have outstripped had he wished it. To overtake her, however, was no part of his intention. He saw her sink down at last on the hill-top, and then he too sat down—to wait. He would not force himself on her, but she should not be alone in that wilderness without some one near her. He must speak to her—by-and-by she might hear him. He was out of her sight, but he sat straining his ears for any sound. The silence of the hills

was unbroken save by the plaintive bleat of a sheep far away on some distant fell, or by the murmur of the waters as they fretted round rock and boulder deep down in the glens below—sounds which were at other times blended in

“That undefined and mingled hum,
Voice of the desert never dumb,”

which we call silence. Now they seemed to force themselves with a startling distinctness on the solitary listener, and to deepen the brooding windless hush of noon. Suffering after a time is mercifully its own anodyne, and for a while Douglas was simply incapable of any further acute emotion. More than once he lifted his head from his hands in a sort of dull wonder as to what he was doing there. At such times he would look round in vacant questioning on the billowy lines of hills, now a whitish yellow with the faded grass, or down into the glens, each with its slow gurgling stream, whose windings were marked out by the dark fringe of alders. The un-

clouded morning had long since been overcast, and the sky was now cumbered with vast piles of cloud. Their towering summits, seeming as solid and immovable as the everlasting hills beneath, were tinged with a faint brassy light, though the sun was hidden, while their lower edges lowered a purplish black over the moors, which looked bleached and ghastly by contrast with that ominous canopy. He saw it all, but at the time it was as much a blank to him as at intervals his mind was. Afterwards it came back to him clearly enough,—every dip and fold of the hills, every burn and glen, and that motionless figure on the ridge of the hill between him and the threatening sky. All the world seemed narrowed down to him and to her; common life had receded to some unknown distance. When he could think, it was only of Adair—of what he had done, and how he might undo it, if ever he could. On that possibility all existence was centred, every hope was staked. Beyond the morning's madness the past was for the moment blotted out; into the future he dared not look. How

the time passed he hardly knew, till, rousing himself after one of those lapses into semi-unconsciousness, he found that it was already late afternoon. Yet it seemed years rather than hours since the sun that was now westering behind those clouds had risen upon him in glory. The head of the valley was filling with mists, the cloud-pall was drooping lower and heavier. He rose and ventured a little nearer to Adair, as he had done already once or twice unseen. She was still seated in the same position, from which she had apparently never stirred, her eyes fixed on the faint blur of dusky orange beyond the western hills. Come what might, this stony stillness must be broken; she could not stay here longer with a stormy autumn night coming on. He had no right—less than none—to intrude on her; but if the sight of him roused her even to anger, it would be better than this.

There was no more numbness of feeling to contend against, as with a few rapid strides Douglas crossed the flat hill-top to Adair's side. She made a slight motion as though

she would have risen, if she had had the strength to do so, and then sat still, looking at him with wide woful eyes. Douglas's face was working as he looked at her, but hers was perfectly calm.

"Adair," he said after a moment's pause, while the silence seemed to press and weigh on him like some palpable thing, "I cannot leave you here—we cannot part thus. Will you listen to me? I shall not attempt to excuse myself to you, I know only too well there is none for me, but I am not altogether the cur I must appear in your eyes. Do you think that there could be any sorer punishment than to know that I have brought suffering on you—to feel that I have degraded myself in your sight?" Adair seemed neither to see nor to hear him. He flung himself on his knees on the heather beside her. "Adair," he cried, trying to look into her blank fixed eyes, "speak to me. There is no blame or scorn you could pour on me half so bitter as my own shame at what I have done—that I should have so sinned against you through my very

love for you—the love that should have made me stronger, braver, better; and it would have done so if I had yielded to it sooner, but I have been fighting against nature, and it has taken a cruel revenge.” Whether she heard him or not he hardly knew, but he told her without sparing himself of his life in London, his acquaintance with Cicely Charteris, and her brief fascination for him that was passing even before he rashly bound himself to her. “I was a madman, a fool, anything you please for the moment,” he said bitterly; “but how mad I had been I knew the first time I saw your face again. All my life I have loved you, Adair; I am yours, body, soul, and spirit. Those last few weeks have been a very hell to me. Before God I have striven to keep this hateful bond, but love has been too strong for me. I have done no wrong in loving you, no, not even in telling you of my love; but I have done a cruel wrong to us both in exalting a few hasty words, a mere outward artificial tie, above the union of our hearts, above the love of a lifetime. *There* was the dishonour, not

in snapping and throwing away the empty worthless thing as I ought to have done. And I would have done it this very day, late though it was——”

“Too late,” said Adair, in a cold hard voice, breaking silence for the first time.

“Not yet, Adair—not yet,” pled Douglas. “I have sinned against you beyond forgiveness, but you are not like other women, Adair. I cannot but hope there may be mercy for me even yet. Tell me,” risking everything, “that the love you once had for your cousin Douglas has been killed outright, as well it might by what I have done—that you have nothing left for me but scorn—and I will trouble you no more, but bear my punishment as best I may. But oh, Adair, if you have even pity for me——” His voice broke; their eyes were on a level,—slowly Adair’s fell before the entreating anguish in his; a faint wan blush, very different from love’s triumphant roses of the morning, spread over her white face.

The light flashed into Douglas’s face. “Adair, you can, you will forgive me!” he

said, in an awed, half-incredulous voice. "Oh my love, I can never forgive myself; your goodness makes my sin against you all the blacker, but if all my life can atone for this one day——"

Adair slowly rose to her feet. "Cousin Douglas," she said, with a faint emphasis on the first word, "I can hear no more from Miss Charteris's promised husband." She spoke very quietly, looking him steadily in the face.

Douglas staggered back a pace, as if he had been struck a sudden blow. "Adair!" he cried, "that is utterly at an end; why do you bring her name even between you and me again? We love each other—you do not deny it, Adair: what is she to us, then, any more?"

"Is your pledged word nothing? She has that still, as she ever had. What can be sacred if such a promise is not?"

"Adair," said Douglas, in a very agony, a chill fear coming over him at her passionless face and words,—“for God's sake, don't bring up that miserable fiction again between us! I

thought as you do for a while, and I struggled to keep to it, till my very heart and flesh gave way. I have done harm enough already in my pride in what I chose to call my word, my honour, but it shall not break our hearts and blight both our lives. Before God, Adair, you are mine—you belong to me. I will not let you go.” He could only hold her by the passion of his words, he dared no longer touch her.

Adair only shook her head wearily, as if words were needless, and moved a step away.

Douglas followed her, the possibility of utter actual failure becoming real to him for the first time. She had not rejected him; she had tacitly admitted that, in spite of all, she still loved him. Hope had flamed up again; was it only that it might be more utterly extinguished?

“Adair,” he said, “I have one plea more—a selfish one, if a man pleading for his very life is selfish. It is my life I am praying for at your hands—what is better than life even, belief in truth, or purity, or goodness. You

could make a good man of me, Adair. I know, I feel I have it in me to be something very different. I let loose the devil in me for those few weeks, and that has been my undoing. Will you thrust me back upon a woman who only calls out the evil in me—whose only power over me, such as it was, was over my worst part? I did not think of it then, but I see it now. It is not so much for love, or even for forgiveness, that I am praying now—it is for very salvation. Adair, will you reject me?"

There was a ring of despairing truth in Douglas's appeal. Adair's stony calm gave way. "You are cruel to me, Douglas," she cried, with sudden passion. "Have I not suffered enough? You lay too much on me. No man's life is wholly in the hands of another. Whatever may come, I cannot bid you do wrong now."

The passion of outraged pride and love, of grief and shame, in which she had parted from Douglas in the morning, had spent its force during those hours when she had sat immov-

able while the storm had raged within. She was like some survivor after a hurricane whom the morning light finds alive indeed, but looking round with despairing eyes upon a world in ruins, her house left unto her desolate. Her pride, her trust, her love, had been so whole-hearted, and at one blow they had been slain outright—no, not wholly, for her love still lived. It had grown and strengthened with her life, and would die hard, if ever it did, but the stately tree round which it had twined itself had proved but a broken reed, and now both lay prostrate together in the dust. What did it matter? she said to herself almost wearily, in answer to Douglas's passionate appeals; words could not alter what had been done. They loved each other—yes, why should she not admit it? she could be shamed no further than she had been: but it was Cicely Charteris's pledged lover who was seeking from her now what she had no longer the right to give nor he to take—not the Douglas to whom in the morning she had given herself so proudly, so gladly, so fully. To this one thought she

tenaciously clung, feeling instinctively if once she lost sight of it, that her strength was gone. But Douglas's last words struck a new chord ; she could and she would make the choice between right and duty and her own happiness, and his even, but this alternative was a cruel one.

“Is it wrong, Adair?” said Douglas, hotly. She was roused at least, and he pressed his advantage. “Is it right or wrong to choose heaven or hell,—to turn away from goodness and purity? Is it right or wrong for the sake of a mere fiction to force myself into a hateful bondage, a loveless marriage with a woman I neither honour nor esteem—who cares nothing for me, as why should she? Is it right or wrong to turn what would be my strength and salvation into a source of shame and weakness? You have forgiven me, Adair, and yet you would condemn me to such a fate. You love me, Adair, and yet you bid me do this thing. Oh, my love, my love, let us be done with this; why should we wring our hearts any more? Come to me, Adair, and God do

so to me, and more also, if my whole life is not an amends to you for this day!" The young man was wholly transported out of himself: he held out his arms to her, his face alight with imploring love.

Adair covered her face with her hands. "I can't, I can't!" she cried, in a choked voice. "I don't bid you marry,—that is between you and—*and* her alone; but I cannot and I will not let you break your promise to her for me. I cannot bid you do wrong for my sake."

"That is your last word then, Adair?" asked Douglas, quietly enough, letting his arms fall.

"What more can I say? You know it is right. You held to it yourself, till now you are persuading yourself against your own conscience. If I say more, I will say too much. Oh, Douglas! I can't bear any more: in pity let me go."

Douglas turned his face in silence to the waste hills and the wan overclouded sunset. Adair walked rapidly across the ridge towards the valley. At the edge of the steep slope

she paused and gave one backward look. The tall figure on the sky-line had disappeared. In the utter collapse of his hopes strength seemed to have gone too, and he had flung himself down on the heather. For a moment Adair looked with dry piteous eyes at the strong man laid low; then she went quickly back, and, kneeling beside him, turned his face towards her with hands that did not tremble.

“Oh, my love, good-bye—God keep you!” she cried, kissing him on brow and cheek.

Douglas neither spoke nor moved. He received the caress as silently, as passively, as the dead might. Only too well he knew that from his cousin Adair that kiss was no sign of relenting but the token of utter and final renunciation.

With one last look Adair left him on the bleak hill-top under the gathering night. As she went down, down, with trembling limbs and a cold leaden pressure on heart and brain, she too might have said, like the lonely heart-broken woman, who with her own hands had laid her slain lover in the grave—

“ But think ye no’ my heart was sair,
When I laid the mools on his yellow hair ?
Oh, think ye no’ my heart was wae,
When I turned about away to gae ? ”

Up there, under those heavy clouds, she had left behind her the grave of her youth, her hopes, her happiness—*her* happiness ! if it had been hers alone she could have borne it ; but the last look at that fair fallen head left a pang under which memory would writhe for ever.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE blackness of a moonless September night had fallen long before Adair reached the Old Manse again. Pain was no longer a spur now, as it had been in the morning; it had settled down to the dull heavy weight of an abiding sorrow. More than once she vaguely wondered how she had been able to go so far, as the white ribbon of road, still dimly distinguishable amid the darker grass, unwound its long curves before her. During those past hours she had been caught away from daily life altogether, but now as she pushed open the gate, out of which she had stepped in the morning into a new life, a new world, ordinary existence and all it involved came back with a rush upon her. What could she say as to her long absence, for which account

would be rigorously demanded?—for there is no harder tyranny than that which reigns in a small house, with a female household. A good and substantial reason must be forthcoming for every hour of absence, and solitude, if it is to be obtained at all within the four walls, is at best a doubtful boon. The briefest indulgence in it awakens wondering questions, if it does not cause dire offence. If only she could get up-stairs unnoticed, Adair said to herself, as she groped her way along the flagged hall towards the steep staircase. Vain hope! her weary feet stumbled on the lower step and instantly Agnes burst out of the drawing-room, the lamp-light streaming through the open door behind her.

“Where on earth have you been all day, Adair?” she exclaimed, in a tone of just indignation. “What is the meaning of it? What have you been doing all this time? What do you think we felt when, *hours* after you went away, another message came from Earlshope, and we heard that you had never been there, and that no one knew anything about you?”

Mammy was nearly frantic about you, as I think you might have known she would be. We have had such a day of it too—so many people coming, and I with everything on my hands. First, there was Miss Charteris, of course just when we were in the middle of dinner; but it was a good thing she came, for she told us she had seen you going up the glen, and really no one could have been nicer: she said she had so often wished to come, and was so much interested about us all. And, oh! Adair,”—anger and curiosity subsiding for a moment under the excitement of having something to tell,—“Mr Dallas has been here ever so long. Some old uncle or other who brought him up, and who will leave him heaps of money—so Isabel says—is very ill, and he was telegraphed for, and he came over to say good-bye, and waited and waited to see you. He kept the dog-cart at the gate, and wouldn’t go till the man came to say there was only time to catch the train. I am sure he had something special to say. What on earth took you up the glen

of all places to-day? I am sure you knew that I was tired, and did not want to go to Earlschope. You might have had some consideration."

"Let me alone, Agnes, for once, if you can," broke in Adair, in a tone that for the moment silenced her sister; and turning away, she climbed the stair with slow, heavy, dragging steps. The sudden stream of words had roused her to a sort of desperation—a feeling that she must escape from them anyhow or anywhere; but they had conveyed no meaning to her overwrought mind. As she pushed open the door of her room, a feeble gleam of candle-light met her instead of the hoped-for darkness and emptiness. Elfie was sitting on the bed, with her hands hanging loosely by her sides and her head drooping. For the first time in her life the presence of her young sister was unwelcome to Adair; but through all the confused tumult of her thoughts she was struck by the forlornness of Elfie's look and attitude. She neither moved nor looked up when Adair came in, to whom, as a rule, in all her troubles

she hastened as to a certain consoler, a sure refuge. Adair sat down beside her, and putting her hand gently on the slender shoulder, said with something of an effort—

“What is it, Elfie? Is anything wrong?”

The girl slowly turned her head, and looked at her with dry pitiful eyes. Their expression was something like the dumb wondering reproach in the eyes of some tortured creature that seem to ask in vain why such cruelty should be. Her lips hung apart. She moved them, but for a time no sound came. At last “He has gone away” she whispered.

“He—who, my darling?” said Adair, bewildered. Elfie only looked at her in the same helpless appealing way, and some vague fragments of Agnes’s talk recurred to Adair. What need to ask? she was forgetting everything and every one in her own trouble. Whose coming or going would matter much to Elfie, save George Dallas’s? So it had come, then. Her dread had been but too true. The tears that would not come to relieve her own suffering welled up and brimmed over as she

gathered the slight figure into her arms. "Tell me about it, dear. I think Agnes said something, but I did not understand. When did he go?"

Elfie lay passive. Then after a moment, "There is nothing to tell," she said, in the same voiceless whisper, "except that he said he would come back—yes, he said he would come back. Do you think he will—oh, do you think he will?" She sat erect, and looked imploringly at Adair. The mere repeating of the words seemed to kindle hope again. Adair turned away her face in utter perplexity. What could she say? What help or comfort was there for the poor child in this bitter awakening to a woman's lot? Dallas had said he would come back, whatever that might mean,—anything or nothing; it could never mean, Adair felt with a cold cruel certainty, what it seemed to Elfie.

"Elfie, child," she said in a low voice, "does it matter to you so very much whether Mr Dallas comes back or not? I—I am afraid it is not very likely," she went on

falteringly, not daring to watch the effect of her words. "I think Agnes said some one was ill: he has a great deal to do besides, in London, and people never come here in winter. Do you think we will miss him so very much, after all? He has been a great deal here, of course, and at first it may seem a little strange without him, but," fondling the hand which had suddenly grown rigid, "you and I have always been happy together, haven't we, childie? and in a little while it will all be the same again." Was this all she had to say? oh, what a bitter, miserable mockery!

"Never, never, never!" cried Elfie, her voice rising into a wail; "it can never be the same. I can't tell you. I don't know what it is, but he has taken my life with him. Why shouldn't he come back?" looking up with something almost like passion. "Why should you think he won't? He has been so kind to me—so kind; would he have said it to me if he had not meant it, for he knows I'll be weary, weary till he comes back.

It is you who are unkind to say such a thing, Adair. No, no, I didn't mean that; don't mind what I say,—I don't know what I'm saying," her voice falling to a broken quaver, while the old bewildered look blotted out the new light and life from her face. "Oh, I don't know what is wrong with me." She put her hands to her head, and burst into a fit of loud childlike crying. Adair rocked and stilled her sister in her arms, as if she had been indeed a child. She was thankful to see the tears, but every sob that shook the girl's slight figure stirred to hotter flame the fire within. The life-blood that had been running cold and low surged up through heart and brain in bitter helpless wrath. At such a moment it was impossible that she could be just to the absent. She was ready to believe that Dallas had deliberately played with her child-sister,—that he had regarded her undeveloped nature as a mere interesting study, and had set himself, by way of an experiment, to awaken her mind and feelings. And now he had left her with this meaning-

less assurance that he would return, as one makes vague promises to a disappointed child, and hurries away before, at least, it can cry in our presence. It may sob its heart out afterwards, but we shall not be disturbed by it. Compared with this, the wrong that Douglas had done to herself grew light. At least he loved her; she had been no plaything to him, nor a subject of dilettante psychological inquiry, she said bitterly to herself. Her idol had fallen—it would never be flawless again; but love was striving hard to reinstate it, to cover up the gaping fissures in what had once been so stately and perfect a whole. It was the inevitable reaction after some supreme life crisis, when the first exaltation of high resolve has evaporated a little, when the heart throws off the yoke of conscience, and self, crushed down and silenced for a space, raises its clamorous voice again, and resumes its former sway to avenge that brief dethronement. Then it is, when the flames have died out upon the altar, leaving only cold ashes and charred

unsightly fragments,—when the right hand has been cut off, or the right eye plucked out,—that some busy devil whispers the torturing suggestion that the sacrifice was needless, and that we have maimed ourselves for nothing. Far from being saints or heroes, we have been but hasty fools, and are self-doomed to beg as cripples by the wayside of life, when we might have marched joyfully onward to grasp its fairest prizes. All night through, while she lay still and rigid as the dead lest she should disturb Elfie, who had fallen at last into a moaning uneasy sleep, Adair did battle with her heart, and strove to stifle the voice that kept crying that she had been cruel—cruel to her love. Douglas's pleadings came back to her with redoubled force. Where was he now? she asked herself, as the rain rushed on the roof, and the winds, unleashed at last, raged round the old house, and the swift lightning-stroke clove the darkness. She could not shut out from her fevered eyes that vision of the lonely hill-top, and the despairing abandonment of that prostrate

figure under the lowering night sky. Why had she left him? He had waited and watched over her, she knew it now, through all the long hours of the day, and she had taken every hope from him, and deserted him in his utmost need. What was Miss Charteris to her? went on the relentless inward persecutor, that she should have championed her cause so hotly? If Cicely had truly loved Douglas—"If she loved him as I do," rose the involuntary cry, "there might have been reason for it—but did she?" Adair pressed her hands over her ears, as if there were actual accusing voices around her which she could shut out. No, she had done right, whatever might come; if she could think otherwise it would be madness, she said to herself, over and over again, as the dim, rain-washed, storm-beaten morning stole in, chill and wan, to find her as pale and heavy-eyed as itself. Elfie was sleeping profoundly, a half smile on her parted lips. If only the child had not to waken again! was Adair's involuntary thought, as she looked at

the peaceful young face, with a sort of hungry tenderness, while a very rage of pity devoured her heart. And she could do nothing for her—nothing; she who had been helper, consoler, protector, during all her sister's short life. That frail bark, so long safely harboured and sheltered, was tossing now on the wide ocean of life, where each must shape his own course, and she could only watch its feeble struggles against winds and waves with a boding fearful heart. Is there a keener pang to love than thus to realise its limits—to find there is a "thus far, and no farther," beyond which, strive as it may, it cannot pass?

The days that followed were dreary enough. "The weather had broken," a catastrophe which any one who has spent an autumn in Scotland can fully appreciate. Day followed day, and still the rain fell, slow, soaking, and persistent, or driven in stinging slanting lines before the wind that came tearing down the glen, whirling the yellowing leaves in clouds from the lashing trees. The garden was a pitiful spectacle,—Saunders's brilliant beds

and borders were reduced to a mere waste of storm-beaten discoloured stalks, while the ground was strewn with the delicate many-hued petals. Indoors it was cloudy weather too. Mrs Earlstoun preserved an air of injured dignity, and dropped frosty little hints as to want of confidence and ingratitude, or else expatiated plaintively on the trials of a mother's lot when the children whom she has borne and cared for are children no longer, and despise her help and guidance. Adair, at whom those little darts and slings were levelled, bore them as well as she might. If she could, she would gladly enough have relieved her heart of its aching weight, but she could not lay her trouble bare to curious eyes. Even if she had wished it, she had no right to reveal her bitter secret, since it did not concern herself alone. That it was her secret, was perhaps her only consolation; she was saved, at least, from fretful, wondering comment and remonstrance on what would have been denounced, likely enough, as her folly.

A sudden lull had fallen in the intercourse with Earlshope, which of late had been so constant. None of the usual peremptory invitations or commands were received. To Adair this was at first an unspeakable relief, for how was she to meet Douglas or Miss Charteris again? But mingled with it was a secret longing, growing with every hour, to hear something, anything of her cousin. Late on the afternoon of the third day, in a gleam of stormy sunlight, Isabel's ponies clattered up to the garden gate. Agnes, who was sitting at the window, not, as she fretfully declared, because there was anything worth looking at, gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Could anything show more plainly the depths of dulness to which we have sunk, than that a visit from Isabel should be hailed as a relief?" she said.

Miss Earlstoun was in her most gracious mood. She would have been across sooner, but the dreadful weather had prevented her, and so many guests had been leaving and

others coming. Lady Lorrimore and Lady Hermione had gone,—to seek other happy hunting-grounds, she supposed, with a little laugh; and then, with the calmness of a sovereign princess announcing her matrimonial intentions to her “trusty Commons,” Isabel informed her aunt of her engagement to Sir Claud, and placidly awaited congratulations. Those having been duly tendered with more or less effusion, Isabel went on—

“Oh, but I have not half exhausted my news. I feel quite important to-day. We have been having quite an exciting time those last few days, all sorts of interviews and arrangements have been going on. I daresay,” with a smile, “you were not altogether unprepared for what I have told you. Poor Sir Claud! I really could not hold out against him any longer; but I flatter myself my second piece of news is really *news*. Douglas is to be married to Miss Charteris very shortly,” she said abruptly, fixing her hard cold gaze full on Adair.

There was a pause. Agnes and her mother

exchanged helpless glances. What was expected from them—condolence or congratulation, protest or regret? Adair could not have spoken if she would: her hands closed in a convulsive grasp on the work lying in her lap; the blood rushed back to her heart. It was only what she had expected. Douglas had done what was right, and yet—and yet—

“Don’t all speak at once,” laughed Isabel. “Have you not a word for poor Douglas, Aunt Agnes? However, I don’t wonder you are surprised. I daresay some of the good old-fashioned folk hereabouts will be dreadfully horrified. They will think he is going headlong to perdition, and say all those kind charitable things that only your very good folk can think and say. Certainly it is not the marriage he might have made, but he can afford to please himself. Actresses are received everywhere nowadays. Lady Warriston came across in all the rain to-day. She is wild to have the marriage from her house; indeed it is all but settled that it will be.”

Isabel would probably have regarded the

homely proverb which avers that there is no use crying over spilt milk as a very vulgar saying, but she acted upon its practical wisdom. If Douglas was bent upon behaving like a fool, by all means let him do it in peace: nothing would be gained by fruitless opposition, or by making public all the heartburning and strife that had raged at Earlshope during the last two days. Probably the satisfactory settlement of her own future enabled her to take a more philosophic view. Her cooler counsels prevailed over her mother's quicker feelings and her father's passion of disappointment. Mr Earlstoun's one strong feeling was pride of race and of the old name that had come down to him through so many stormy generations, and both of these Douglas had outraged. He had built his hopes upon his son's marriage, and this was the end of it—a union with a nameless actress, a shameless woman who made a show of herself nightly for money. The usually silent apathetic man broke out into frantic denunciations, into violent opposi-

tion, striving unconsciously, like most feeble natures, to mask failing resolve by outward bluster. This was of little avail against the despairing sort of doggedness with which, after a short interview with Cicely, Douglas had announced his intention, and held to it in spite of argument or entreaty. All the same, although Isabel had counselled acquiescence as the only dignified course, she was bitterly disappointed that the marriage was to take place after all, and perhaps even more that her plan to prevent it had failed, or rather had been frustrated. There must be some special reason for Douglas's sudden reckless insisting on the marriage, about which he had been so passive before, and that reason she believed Adair could furnish. She would find out now.

"I—I hope he will be very happy, I am sure—though it is hardly what one expected, but she is very elegant, and—and——" began Mrs Earlstoun falteringly, finding to her bewilderment that congratulation was evidently to be the order of the day. "Dear me! I

can hardly believe it: I always feel as if Douglas were quite a boy yet. I am sure I shall not know what to say to him when I see him——”

“I think you may keep your mind quite easy as to that, Aunt Agnes,” said Isabel, rising; “you will have plenty of time to prepare a pretty speech, at any rate, for he is going north for some deer-stalking, and asked me to bring you his excuses. Rather cool for a bridegroom-elect, you think? Ah, well, men do take those things coolly, and I suppose he wants to make the most of his freedom. I do not know whether he may come back here or not. Lady Warriston is always impatient to get back to town, and I fancy he will go straight on there for the marriage. I own I agree with her; there is no hunting here to make up for the dreariness. I will send your good wishes, however, if you like, Aunt Agnes. Have you no message, Adair? You and Douglas used to be such allies,” looking relentlessly into the girl’s white face.

"You may send my good wishes too, if you think them of consequence enough."

"Is that all? Have you nothing more to say? Come, we have not had your opinion yet."

"I think Douglas has done quite right, and you may tell him so if you choose," said Adair, fronting her persecutor steadily. Isabel looked keenly at her for a moment.

"Glad you think so, but I am afraid every one won't take such an enlightened view. I must go, though; those little beasts of mine will be getting frantic: they have not been out for a day or two. You or Aggie will come across to-morrow night, won't you—and bring Elfie with you, by the by?"

"She is not very well," struck in Adair, hastily.

"Isn't she?—what's the matter?" said Isabel, carelessly. "Cold, I suppose. This rain is enough to knock up anybody. Are you well enough yourself? you are looking dreadfully pale."

"I am always pale," trying to call up a smile.

"Oh, I daresay, but there are degrees of paleness. You are looking positively ghastly. What has she been doing to herself, Aunt Agnes?"

"She took far too long a walk the other day," said Mrs Earlstoun, fretfully. "I told you so at the time, Adair, and you see your cousin notices it too. I got quite alarmed, she was out so late."

"Really," said Isabel. "Long walks seem to be the fashion. Douglas did not turn up the other day till all hours, and finally was caught in the thunderstorm at night, I believe. But there is no need to worry over anything a man does. There won't be much temptation to indulge in long walks now, though," with a meaning smile that brought the blood to Adair's cheeks. "How tiresome! I believe the rain is coming on again. I shall not get home without a drenching, after all. Don't forget about to-morrow night, Aggie; there are some nice new men coming. It will be quite worth while putting on your best frock."

CHAPTER XIX.

“FOR pity’s sake, put down that book and say something, Adair. I have started five separate subjects within the last half hour, and I think it is your turn now. We shall forget the use of our tongues altogether by-and-by. Were we always as dull as this in winter? Surely not, or else we couldn’t have survived it.”

“What am I to say?” said Adair, looking up from the book in which she had taken refuge as an excuse for sitting silent for a little. “Neither the weather nor Mirren’s delinquencies are cheering subjects, and there does not seem to be anything else. I have not even been to the Water-foot, nor seen Mrs Mackay nor Saunders, for days: they might have supplied us with something. Shall

I read you a bit?" in the vain hope of escaping another desultory talk, which was certain to work round sooner or later to that one topic of absorbing interest in the glen—the Earlstoun weddings.

"Thank you, no, unless it's something diverting, which your books never are. I don't care what you say; anything is better than to sit like so many moping owls, with me and Mammy yawning, as well we may, or you and Elfie sighing like a couple of furnaces, at intervals. *Talk—talk—talk!*"

If "he that singeth songs to an heavy heart" is considered a fit subject for denunciation, what of those who, not satisfied with that, demand songs from it? Civilisation would indeed need to have tamed our natures, as it has shut up so many a former vent for feelings. The rent garments, the sackcloth and ashes in which a passionate sorrow may have found some relief, are things of the past, and the mourner is bidden to find solace in deciding on the depth of crape, or the breadth of a handkerchief

border. If this is so with legitimate and recognised griefs, what of those far crueller ones often, for which the world has neither patience nor pity? Adair had had need of all her pride in those last weary weeks. As might be supposed, Douglas's intended marriage had electrified the country-side. Nothing else was talked of, morning, noon, and night. Mrs Mackay and such neighbours who were not on visiting terms at Earlshope, flocked to the Old Manse to glean every possible detail. The Water-side had not had such a feast of gossip for years—indeed it was an *embarras des richesses*, as Isabel's wedding would have amply supplied topics for a winter's talk, but now it was all but eclipsed in this greater excitement. Mrs Mackay took high ground. "Poor Mrs Earlstoun! I am very sorry for her, but I can look on this as nothing less than a judgment. I am sure she has had lessons enough in the conduct of her eldest son to keep her from bringing temptation under her very roof, and exposing poor Mr Douglas to

it. The first night I saw the creature with her red gown like what no other one had on, and her bare arms, I felt no good could come of it. Poor Mr Douglas! I think he is to be pitied rather than blamed. A young man has no chance with a hussy like that. Dear, dear! and he was such a nice lad! I remember him coming on his pony to get his lessons from Mr Mackay. I did hope he would have been better guided; we all thought he would have chosen nearer home," and Mrs Mackay shook her head mournfully, and looked with inquiring eyes into Adair's. For once Saunders and the lady of the Manse were in full accord. The long-standing feud between them was in abeyance for the moment, for if some generous mutual admiration be a strong bond, much more so is a hearty aversion, and two people rarely wax more friendly than when engaged in the vigorous traducing of some absent third party. The old misogynist of the Rule Water was as bitterly disappointed in the failure of his pet project as the popular type of scheming matron is supposed to be,

when the match of the season eludes her well-laid gins and snares. He had dreaded danger from another quarter—he had feared that his favourite might be beguiled by “the lang Englishman;” but such a catastrophe as had occurred was beyond his utmost forebodings. With the primeval instinct of man he too blamed the woman, and ransacked Scripture for instances of female depravity, likening Miss Charteris to Potiphar’s wife, Jezebel, and “the Midianitish woman,” with other equally graphic but more recondite comparisons, supplied by an exhaustive study of the Apocalypse and the minor prophets.

“’Deed, mem,” he would wind up many a colloquy, “it’s an unco peety that a braw laud like Maister Dooglas should hae been so left to himsel’. What says the Word: ‘Ephraim is joined to his idols; let him alane.’ There’s no denyin’t, the ways o’ Providence are mysterious—unco mysterious.” Saunders would have shuddered at the bare idea of questioning the will of the Most High. He could never have said—

“Does God A'moighty know what He's doin' a-täakin' o' me?”

But, like many other worthy people, he seemed to regard Providence as a kind of secondary deity, whose doings might safely be questioned, or even murmured at in moderation and with impunity—the civilised and Christian version of the African's maltreatment of his fetish.

When at the Old Manse, he provoked Adair to impatient and, as he evidently thought, untimely laughter, by following her about wearing the air of decent gloom with which he assisted at all the funerals of the district. He found a practical vent for his sympathy in working with redoubled energy in the garden. His one regret was that at that season there was, after all, but little he could do; and sometimes Adair was stirred to a sort of rueful amusement by finding that some fancied improvement, for which she had long striven in vain, had been suddenly executed without her knowledge. If the alteration of a flower-bed or the clipping of a box-edging can hardly

be regarded as radical remedies for a mind diseased, they were kindly meant; and the wistful look on the hard old face, watching for some recognition of his efforts, brought the quick moisture to Adair's eyes.

In "the country-side" generally there was but little friendly feeling to turn the sharp edge of busy tongues. On the contrary, there was a scarcely veiled satisfaction at this second blow to the pride of a family who, in Muir-shiels parlance, "held their heads too high."

"Bad lot all of them,—blood will out," said General Jardine with unction. "The only wonder is the young man thought the ceremony necessary; might have been better for the estate by-and-by if he hadn't," with a chuckle.

Outward attacks Adair could parry lightly enough, but the daily strain of home-life was growing unbearable. Her old visions of independence rose again before her. Work, work of any sort, no matter how hard or how heavy, if it would but fill her mind with other thoughts, she would cry to herself after spend-

ing many a long day shut up within four walls while the rain fell without. Her mother and sister had guessed something from Isabel's hints, and had imagined the rest; and though they probably did not mean to be unkind, they resented what they considered her want of confidence, and spared the hot sore heart no prick. More than once, when she had all but resolved to turn her vague dreams into some definite plan, at a word or a look from Elfie they would vanish for the moment. How could she leave her? The girl clung to her more closely than ever in speechless pathetic dependence. With a reticence that had rather surprised Adair, Elfie had never mentioned George Dallas's name again, and any chance reference to him made her shrink away into a sort of scared silence. Adair often found her, however, sitting at a little staircase-window that looked down the glen, with her forehead pressed against the glass, and her wide straining gaze fixed on the long blank stretch of road. At first Adair would beg her to come away and not to sit in the cold, and she would

submit quite quietly, the old vacant look veiling the eagerness in her eyes; but after a time, with a heavy heart, Adair left her alone. She would leave her in peace, since she could do nothing else for her, she said bitterly enough. Another day, on going up to her room, she found Elfie poring over some papers, which she hurriedly tried to thrust away. Why the little action should have given her so keen a pang Adair could hardly have told. "Why should you hide anything from me, Elfie?" she said.

"You won't take them from me?" said the girl, in a hoarse whisper. "They are mine—he gave them to me. It is all I have"—clutching the papers against her breast.

"Darling, why should I take them?" said Adair, soothingly; and Elfie spread out the crumpled papers. They were but one or two leaves roughly torn out of a pocket-book, on which, one day when they were talking of some of Dallas's East End experiences, he had jotted down for Elfie's amusement little sketches of the various characters he was de-

scribing. She remembered Elfie's breathless delight and wonder as a clever stroke or two produced several species of the genus *gamin*, or a very battered and unromantic flower-girl, and the various waifs and strays of street life. Adair's eyes grew dim as she looked at them. She gave them back to Elfie in silence. And these were all she had! Poor child!—poor child!

Soon Adair's own grievous pain was thrust aside more and more by her growing anxiety for her sister. Winter comes early in those high-lying glens, and this year it seemed to come sooner than usual. The leaves had long ago been whirled off the trees, leaving bare the long grey front of Earlshope, with its rows of shuttered windows staring like so many blank sightless eyes. The larch plantations spread over the hills, like dull brown blankets flung down here and there at random. The Rule, fed by the melting of the first snowfall, which still lay in grimy unsightly patches in the hollows of the hills, roared by, hoarse and strong—a rushing red torrent flecked with

discoloured foam, very different from the clear murmuring summer stream. To Adair's eyes it seemed as if Elfie drooped visibly with every chill dripping day as it passed. Two lines from a doleful ditty that Mirren had lately taken to chanting—a result perhaps of the general atmosphere of depression that reigned within and without—haunted her incessantly :—

“She was wearin’ awa’—she was wearin’ awa’;

Wi’ the leaves in October we thocht she wad fa’.”

Adair tried to assure herself that it was only her morbid fancy, and that Elfie was always languid in cold weather; but at last she could keep her fears to herself no longer. One night Elfie had been sitting silent in the big arm-chair, her eyes fixed with an unseeing look on the little spurts and jets of flame, when Agnes looked up from her work with a fretful exclamation. “I must have mislaid a skein of silk somewhere, and it is just the very one I want. Elfie, you are doing nothing; do run and see if you can find it somewhere up-stairs.”

The girl sat up, and then let herself fall back into her chair again. "I am so tired!" she said plaintively.

"Get it yourself, Agnes," said Adair, in an indignant whisper.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Agnes; "what have you been doing to tire yourself? I don't know how you can doze your time away as you do."

Adair sprang to her feet. "Where is this all-important thing likely to be, and I shall get it."

"No, Adair; sit down, please," said Mrs Earlstoun, with a little judicial air. "I quite agree with Agnes that Elfie should try and rouse herself a little. Go and look for what your sister wants, my dear, since you have no useful occupation of your own."

Elfie walked to the door in a tremulous groping way. Adair could hardly wait till it closed to exclaim impetuously, "Mother, the child is *ill*—she is not idle merely. Do let me write and ask Dr Morton to come and see her. I think we have all been blind. We

are letting her fade away before our very eyes."

A peevish little wrinkle appeared on Mrs Earlstoun's forehead. "You take such extreme views of things, Adair. I don't think Elfie looks any worse than usual. You know she is never very strong in winter. I dare-say she may have a little cold, but I think it would be absurd to bring Dr Morton all the way from Muirshiels for that. Do you think of his fee for coming here?"

"Yes, I do; but I think of Elfie more."

"I don't know why you should set up as Elfie's champion-in-chief, Adair," said Agnes, in an injured voice. "One would think I was a perfect tyrant for asking such a trifle. Really I think you coddle Elfie too much. She is going back into all her lack-lustre ways. See how she brightened up in summer. She gets moped and fanciful sitting mooning at the fire."

A few days more, however, and Elfie was too tired to rise. No; she was not in pain, she would be quite well soon, she was only

tired—so tired ! Dr Morton, summoned at last, was professionally vague—“no organic disease—no immediate cause of alarm, far from it indeed ; but a great want of stamina—the system in a very enfeebled state”—from which rather meaningless phrases Adair tried to extract what comfort she could. She took possession of the sick-room, till Agnes complained, with a pout, that there was no need of her trying to do anything for Elfie, when her very perfunctory offers of assistance were declined. Not that much service was required—not nearly so much as Adair would fain have rendered. Elfie was the quietest and the least exacting of invalids : she would lie for hours with her wide clouded gaze fixed on the square of sky, the grey drifting clouds, or the gleams of wintry sunshine seen through the little window ; or with the dark-fringed lids, under which the shadow was deepening, resting on the almost transparent whiteness of her cheeks. Under her pillow Adair had placed the precious scraps of paper, and, sleeping or waking, the girl’s hand instinctively stole there.

Day followed day, every hour laden with the burden of anxiety and growing fear; but once gone, how quickly they seemed to have melted away, till days had grown into weeks. As the tide ebbs, one little ripple seems almost to attain to the mark of the last on the ribbed brown sand; but imperceptibly the living waters are receding farther and farther, and the stretch of barren sand is widening with every moment: so the tide of life was gradually sinking down. By degrees Dr Morton's hearty boisterous assurances became more subdued; Adair ceased to speak of what they would do when Elsie was better, and one little habit of active life had to be laid aside after another. To Adair the whole world was narrowed down to the four walls of that attic room, and to that young fading life. One day, after an elaborate feint of concealing it from her, Agnes, with a significant look, gave her a newspaper. Several closely printed columns were headed in big black letters, "Marriage of Douglas Earlstoun, Esq., yr. of Earlishope." The local reporter had evidently wrestled

in vain, with the aid of every admiringly descriptive adjective in the English language, to do justice to the magnitude of the occasion. The manly aspect of the bridegroom, his "deeds of personal prowess on Britain's battle-fields abroad," "the *spirituelle* and intellectual charms" of the bride, and "her Thespian renown," were fondly dwelt upon. The latter was made the text for a long dissertation upon the advancing enlightenment of the age, consequent upon the wider dissemination of culture and the arts, &c. Adair read the whole precious production through, sparing herself not one detail of the "magnificent dresses," the costly and priceless gifts, nor the sumptuous *déjeuner* at the mansion of that vivacious and *belle Américaine*, Lady Warriston, to quote the 'Patriot's' special correspondent. She laid the paper down, conscious only of a dull stupefied wonder that she did not feel it all more keenly. So that was over, she said to herself, like one stunned almost into indifference. Her love was lost to her for ever, but must she lose her child too, the only creature who

needed her, to whom she was dear? She sat quite still, for her hand was clasped in Elfie's slender wasted fingers; but her whole soul was one mad revolt against what she knew was surely coming. Elfie's feet were already on those steep slopes beneath which flows the dark river. She was going down fast, fast, slipping away without a murmur, without a struggle, from life and all it might hold—from the agonised grasp of frail human love that would fain have held her back, and battled with the strong death-angel for his prey. Elfie was dying, and Adair knew it, but she refused to acknowledge it even to herself. God could not be so cruel. He would not leave her utterly desolate, she cried to herself in the silence, her whole being one voiceless prayer, or rather not so much prayer as a frantic besieging of heaven for this one boon, a demand rather than an entreaty for this one life.

The last hours of the year had all but run, —midnight was verging upon morning; her mother and sister, dropping facile tears, had

shared her watch for a time, but at last she was left alone. Outside there reigned the stillness of intense frost; the stars, keen and bright and hard, seemed like cold eyes looking down from their infinite remoteness on mortal strife and suffering. In the stillness she could hear the lap and gurgle of the Rule on its ice-bound banks, to her ear like the wash of those cold waters that were rising inch by inch, and would soon close over that young head. Elfie lay breathing—nothing more. For hours she had lain so, with her hand in Adair's. If her sister withdrew her hand for a moment she grew restless, so much contact she still had with the living world. One by one the black hours of earliest morning struck heavy and slow, and still the light breathing rose and fell. To Adair's overstrained senses it seemed at times to quiver and cease altogether. She had cried for life; now with the same intensity she craved for one look, for one word, before the silence. Would those eyes ever open on her on earth again?

Adair would have said it was utterly impossible for her to sleep, but at last a drowsiness must have come over her. All at once she started, every nerve thrilling, and looked fearfully round the room. The fire had burned low; the screen she had placed between her and the lamp threw a shadow like broad dark wings hovering over the bed, and the white motionless form lying there. A long wailing gust broke the frost-bound stillness without, rattled the dry stiff branches, shook the heavy window, and died away in the distance. She was no longer alone in her watch—an unseen presence was waiting with her. Hurriedly she brought the lamp near. Adair had never looked on death before, but she read its unmistakable stamp on the sharpened face, all the more pitiful in its youthfulness since the soft heavy mass of hair had been cut away. She could not speak, she could not think; the chill hand that was stilling those last fluttering heart-throbs seemed pressing on her own. All at once the eyes opened, the lips moved. Adair hung over them in an agony of expect-

tation. A faint murmur came—at last words ! It was George Dallas's name ! With a hoarse cry Adair flung herself on the bed. “Elfie !” she cried, “Elfie ! have you not one word for me ?” The piercing entreaty rang shrill through the silent house. Did it pierce farther to those dim unknown regions that part the Seen from the Unseen, and stay the spirit on the verge of life ? Who can say ? Once more the soft eyes opened and looked full into Adair's face. In their clear depths there was a cloud no longer.

CHAPTER XX.

“MY dear, you must not cherish a rebellious spirit. We must submit to whatever He sees right to inflict. ‘Thy will, not mine, O Lord,’ is the Christian spirit, you know,”—thus Mrs Mackay in a solemn hortatory tone, pressing Adair’s passive hand between two plump perspiring palms as she spoke. She had come to fulfil her bounden duty of weeping with those who wept, although, as she had said to her spouse in the morning, she regarded the poor thing’s death as really quite a providence. A helpless creature like that was a great burden to people in the Earlstouns’ position. Who knew how long Mr Earlstoun or his son after him would be inclined to support them? and if the girls were marrying, or if they had to work for

themselves, they would not find it so easy with that poor child on their hands. Really they should be thankful, she thought, that poor Elfie had slipped quietly away. In this frame of chastened regret she had come, with her little stock of texts and phrases suitable for "a case of bereavement" all ready. Somehow she did not find it so easy as usual to administer those time-honoured platitudes with Adair sitting opposite to her, with set face and dry gloomy eyes. The girl had just lost her sister, and did not shed a tear—there was something unnatural, if not wrong, about it. It checked her own display of emotion, which she had come quite prepared to make—for in spite of her practical views, she was a kind-hearted woman, and would very readily have indulged in "a good cry." But this cold silence disconcerted her, and drove her from the safe beaten track into efforts to bring the girl to a better frame of mind, which meant, of course, that she ought to be able to regard her loss from Mrs Mackay's point of view.

“All things work together for good, you know,”—a cheering conviction so easily entertained when it is not the desire of our own eyes that has been reft from us. “I can quite understand your feelings, my dear,—I can speak from experience; but the sooner we recognise that, the better for ourselves. I remember my first trial,” partly releasing Adair’s hand to hunt for her handkerchief amid the folds of her gown; “Dear me!” dropping into the querulous tone Adair knew so well, “I wish Miss Jarvie would put my pocket where I could get at it easily. Sometimes I have fairly to stand up before I can find it, and that’s very awkward, isn’t it? If she is making your dresses, I would give her a word about that, my dear. Everything is for the best, of course,” the handkerchief having been found at last, “and I am sure you would find it helpful if you could acknowledge that. Elfie, poor dear child, was never very strong, you know; she would always have been a care to you. She was not fit to battle with the world. So long as she was a

child it did not matter so much, but I am sure I often wondered what would become of her. Your dear mother, now, is taking it so beautifully and so sensibly too, and that is just what she said to me, that Elfie's future was quite a burden on her mind, and now the dear child is safe for ever—a folded lamb, my dear.” The handkerchief was again applied to. “I know she was a special pet of yours, but if you would try to see it in that light. I would not say this to any one else, of course, but between ourselves there is no harm in admitting it,” she stumbled on, while Adair drew away her hands and folded them tightly together. “She was a sweet gentle creature, and I am sure you must miss her very much, but she was not quite——”

“Not quite what, Mrs Mackay?” said Adair, in a cold level voice.

“Oh, my dear, you know what I mean, I am sure. She wasn't quite like other people, you know. Of course she might have outgrown it if she had got stronger; but then, you know, she might not,” growing more and

more confused. "Oh, here's Aggie," breaking off in unmistakable relief as Agnes came in, red-eyed and handkerchief in hand. To Mrs Mackay the younger sister was a more comprehensible mourner, sobbing about poor dear Elfie, but able to dry her tears and accept due consolation, and ere long to discuss the respective merits of merino and paramatta—"As of course people have to do, whatever their feelings may be," said Mrs Mackay afterwards, in an aggrieved tone. "And I wonder who should know what feelings are if I don't? I haven't lost three for nothing; but then I trust I took my affliction in a right spirit."

Agnes had cried herself sick for a day, had stayed in bed for another—being overcome by her feelings, it was understood—and by the next was quite able to take a lively share in the inevitable sordid bustle of mourning.

"I think black is not at all unbecoming to me," she said, as she complacently studied the effect of a crape bonnet upon her soft fair hair. Adair broke into a harsh jarring laugh.

“I am glad you find yourself able to laugh,” said Agnes primly, gazing at her with an air of reproachful surprise.

“One would think poor dear Elfie had been nothing to us,” she complained fretfully to her mother. “Adair seems to think she was the only one who cared anything for her. I am really getting afraid to speak to her : one never knows how she will take the most innocent remark.”

Possibly the girl was not a very easy house-mate at this time. Her mother said it was a duty to be cheerful, and she and Agnes regarded their rapidly recovering spirits as a result of meritorious self-denial, but their talk would shrink into silence before Adair’s white face and heavy eyes. She herself was conscious that she was a restraint upon them ; but she was too unhappy to give much heed always to her looks or words. If she could only be let alone, she cried to herself, as friend after friend came with their “vacant chaff well-meant for grain” ; and through all their stereotyped well - meant phrases ran the

suggestion which Mrs Mackay had put into words. Her mother and sister thought so too, she knew. After the first natural regrets they would be quite ready to acquiesce in this "dispensation of Providence," and this bitter consciousness made her shut herself up more and more in her own sorrow—sorrow not for Elfie alone, for the old heart-wound, unheeded for a time, was bleeding afresh. Elfie's dependence on her had been the one balm for it, and had helped her almost to forgetfulness at times; but now that the white face was gone from the pillow, that no one needed her care, her love, her tending, any longer, she realised to the full the desolation of her life. Till now she had not known how that frail young life had twined itself with every fibre of her own. Sitting in her empty room, she would rouse herself with a guilty start, thinking it was time for some little duty,—the food or medicine that would be needed no more; or she would break out involuntarily into piteous incoherent prayers—to whom she hardly knew—that they would care for

her child, that they would be kind to her where she was. Where? where?—the cry that goes out from so many hearts into the void. To Adair, as to most untried hearts, the vision of the golden city and its throngs of triumphant ransomed souls, set free for ever from sin and suffering, had seemed a solid and glorious reality until now, when she strove to picture one dear familiar figure amongst them. Then, like the fading splendours of the jewelled west, the City of the Saints dissolved like a dream. She had lost Elfie. That was not she, that fair white image lying there in meek but solemn majesty, with that rapt *seeing* look, though the eyes were closed for ever, on the face, familiar and yet so strange. Still less could she think of her as amongst the pure and passionless dwellers in that land which to Adair, in her bewildered misery, seemed indeed very far off. It was the dear daily presence she craved, the little sister who had clung to her, and whose absolute unquestioning love and trust had of late been to her weary heart a very hiding-

place. Elfie might love her yet—she did not know, but such love was

“No more for earth’s familiar household use,—
No more.”

Brooding thus, and feeling as if every prop to faith and hope, heedlessly accepted as secure until now, was failing her, it was perhaps little wonder if resignation, as preached by Mrs Mackay or exemplified at home, hardly commended itself to her. Her mother and sister would be happier without her, she said sadly to herself, conscious of the involuntary hush that fell whenever she came into the room. Why should she let her life run to waste any longer? There must be some work in the world she could do—some one, perhaps, whom she could help. At least, if she could but earn her own bread, there would be one less hanging on to the bounty of Earlshope. The consciousness of their dependence had always been bitter to her; it had become tenfold more so now. What could she do, half educated and wholly untrained to

any special pursuit as she was? She was strong, she could be patient. Dr Morton had said to her in his half-jesting way that she had the makings of a fine nurse in her. So, taking her courage in both hands, she went to Muirshiels to consult him about it.

Dr Morton received her proposal as a kindly elderly man of good old-fashioned ideas might be expected to do. A woman's natural destiny was marriage and motherhood. If she missed that, then she might take up with something else and make the best of it she could; but, for his part, he had no patience with this over-educating of girls, and starting them on independent careers. Let them stay at home and learn to be good housekeepers, and marry in due course, as girls had done in his young days, and the world was both healthier and happier then. Couldn't get husbands nowadays? No wonder: a man did not want an encyclopædia for his wife. He listened to Adair in an amused indulgent way, patted her on the back in a fatherly manner, and said with a laugh—

“Go away home, my dear, and put that nonsense out of your head. *Mr Right* will come some fine day, take my word for it—see if he won’t. If there was nothing else in the way, you are far too young and too pretty to go nursing all and sundry. Come now, let us hear no more of it.”

Adair flushed with impatience. “Doctor,” she said, “will you try to understand that I am in earnest? I cannot stay idle at home any longer. I want something to do, and I want to earn some money. I don’t know any one thing I am fit for, but I think I could learn to nurse. You said so yourself. Now, will you help me or will you not?”

There was no doubting the girl’s earnestness, at least.

“You don’t know what you are undertaking, Adair,” said Dr Morton, more seriously. “Professional nursing is a very different affair from amateur work. If it is money you want, you will get very little, if any, at first; you will have a great deal of hard dirty work to begin with, and you will see things that will shock

you dreadfully. And then, remember you'll find it very different to be one among a lot of probationers, at everybody's beck and call, from being Miss Adair Earlstoun. How will you like that, eh?"

"I shall not like it at all, but all the same I am determined to try it," said Adair; and by stubborn holding to her point, she brought Dr Morton to promise grudgingly that he would do what he could, and do it at once.

"I suppose you'll want to go to Edinburgh? You would not care to go farther from home?" he asked, as she rose to go.

"I do not care where I go. It does not matter. I will go anywhere," said Adair, dispiritedly.

"My oldest friend is one of the surgeons at St Matthew's. Like a wise man, he didn't bury himself in a country practice. I shall write to him, if you like, and see what he can do. Mind, it's a great chance to get in there, if you should be lucky enough. I don't say you will."

Adair thanked him and left, and the doctor

sat down to write his letter, muttering as he did so the apparently irrelevant remark, "Confound that daft young idiot! What possessed him to take up with that yellow-faced play-acting limmer?"

The short January day was drawing to a close as Adair neared home again. The sun had already gone behind the hills; in the west there was only a band of keen greenish light, but south and east the horizon haze glowed rosy red, and above, in the empty sky, hung the moon, still virgin white. Adair walked quickly until she had left the village and its little signs of life behind,—the reddening forge, the firelight gleams from door or window, the cows being noisily driven homeward, their breath rising into the frosty air in a pillar of cloud. Then her steps slackened. As she went slowly along with her eyes fixed on the sky, her feet stumbled now and then over the stiffening ruts in the rough country road. The wide arch of frosty twilight blue all suffused with a faint indefinable glow and colour, was palpitating as if with auroral

light. Where was it, that land whose inhabitants shall no more say, "I am sick"? Beyond those transparent heights, as she had dreamed in childhood? Her heart rose in a great cry as she paused unconsciously, her eyes straining up, up, up, as if by sheer passion of desire she could force their secret from the unanswering heavens.

A firm quick step rang out on the hard road. With a start and a shiver she awoke from her trance of vain appeal; her yearning gaze fell from the far serenity above to meet two dark eager eyes. She was face to face with George Dallas!

Adair fell back a step. "Why did you come? Oh, why did you come now? You are too late! You are too late! Oh, it is cruel, cruel," she cried wildly, striking her hands together. Between the fading twilight and the brightening moon there was light enough to see her face, and the sudden anguish that leaped into her sombre eyes. At that look Dallas caught his breath, the quick words died from his lips, he stood for a moment in

grieved silence. When he had left Earlshope for his uncle's deathbed, without a chance of speaking to Adair, he felt as if he had left all hope behind him. He had tried to write to her more than once, but had given up the vain attempt, feeling that he must plead his own cause. Then had come the amazing news of Douglas Earlstoun's engagement and marriage, which, while it filled him with a stupefied wonder that any man could have known Adair all his life and yet have chosen another woman, made hope leap to fullest life again. He had been right, then,—his chief dread was removed. Douglas could never have felt more for Adair than cousinly friendship, else such a woman as Cicely Charteris could have had no attraction for him. Sitting in the solemn library of the great hushed house, where the old man who had been father and mother to him was slowly dying, he was back again under the flickering orchard-leaves by the water-side. He was once more watching the sunlight play on a girl's bent head and fair abstracted face, and seeing with quickened

heart - throbs the warm blood rise and the sweet eyes kindle, and then fall when they met his gaze. Oftentimes he was sorely tempted to leave his post and make a rush down to Scotland. General Dallas hardly knew him ; he was almost beyond the reach of human voice or hand. Might he not go, if but for a day ? his uncle would not miss him. And yet, with something like a woman's pitying tenderness, he could not bear to leave him. The old man had showed such indulgent kindness to him, though he had neither understood nor sympathised with his pursuits ; he had begged for his presence, and he might rally again, only to find him gone. So week after week had passed, until at last Death had set both free, as Dallas felt, not without shame, was his own uppermost thought. Arrived at the Old Manse, he had learned for the first time of the sorrow that had fallen upon Adair, for instinctively he associated it with her instead of with the mother, who dilated with such plaintive insistence on her own grief. He had told Mrs Earlstoun plainly

of his hopes and intentions, and had been warmly assured of her support and approval in return. When at last he could bear the delay no longer, and had suggested that he might go to meet Adair, Agnes had followed him, and with some pretty hesitation had told him that he must not be surprised if he found Adair a good deal changed. She had felt their loss so much, she had shut herself up in her trouble, people took those things so differently, and perhaps, just at first—he wouldn't misunderstand her?—and the blue eyes looked up very beseechingly into his. Far from it, Dallas thought it very sisterly and kind, and pressed the little hand deprecatingly held out. He set off with rapid steps, while Agnes returned to the drawing-room, exclaiming—

“Oh, what a chance for Adair, if only she will be sensible! If I were she, I'd jump at anybody or *anything* that asked me if only to show Douglas, and above all *Mrs* Douglas, that I was not wearing the willow. There is no saying what she will do. I wish we could have had a word with her first, but I

don't suppose it would have done any good. Oh dear me! why had not the man the sense and the taste to prefer *me*? I would have put up most gladly, for the sake of the old man's funds, with the young one's fads."

Poor Elfie! Dallas's mind was very full of her as he hurried on in the deepening twilight. Possibly he too was not free from the feeling that this gentle fading away before she had known trouble or sorrow was the ending most to be desired for that shadowed life. Her pale wistful face rose up before him; her great clouded eyes, with that pathetic questioning look in their depths, as if the fettered spirit at times grew conscious of its bonds, and struggled to be free. Well, it would be at liberty now in that light where we shall see light. Poor child! what a sweet loving creature she was, recalling her whispered words the last time they had sat together in the garden. He must finish that picture now, such as it was. Adair might like to have it, even though— But here those gentle memories gave place to the unending argu-

ments of an anxious lover, and the first sight of Adair banished everything from his mind save that they were together at last—that the moment he had so long looked for had come. The pain and reproach in her voice, more even than in her words, struck him dumb. Was the wound so deep then?

“Why did you come? What has brought you now?” she repeated, as he stood silent a moment.

“Did you wish for me sooner?” he asked eagerly. “If I had only known! But indeed I could not come sooner, though I was sorely tempted to do so. I have been waiting by a deathbed too, Adair,” his voice falling, “but it was a long life slowly wearing away—not like your grief, dear. I did not know of it until I heard of it now at your home. I am truly, truly sorry,”—weak words, but the tone said more. He tried to go on with that vain effort when one heart seeks to show its sympathy in the grief of another, which yet it cannot wholly share. The task was all the harder with Adair, her brief outburst over,

standing immovable a few paces from him. Her face was like a white stony mask in the moonlight. If he had only had the right he might have comforted her. Could he dare to urge his wishes on her now? and yet it was hard to leave without one word of hope!

"I would rather you did not speak to me of her," broke in Adair. Her voice and eyes were as cold as the frosty light. "You have come, you have kept your promise to her; I thank you for that, at least, though it can do no good now. Perhaps she may know even yet—I cannot tell. We need say no more, I think," and with a little farewell inclination she would have passed him and gone on, had he not caught her by the hand.

"But we must say more. What is this, Adair? What do you mean? I have a right to know," he exclaimed.

"I cannot tell you. If you have a heart at all, there is no need for me to tell you. I have said too much already. Would you have me shame the dead?" her voice breaking. "Let me go, Mr Dallas. I know of no

right you have to ask more, nor any need for further words between us."

"I have a right," said Dallas, hotly, "and come what may I must tell you. I can keep it to myself no longer. I cannot tell how you have misunderstood me. I do not know of what you accuse me, but I must and I will know, that at least I may clear myself in your eyes. Adair, I love you, and that gives me a right at least to justice. Oh, my dear," coming nearer, "why have you forced me to tell it you so? Did you never see it—did you never think of it? I waited and hoped in vain to tell you of it before I went away. I have lived for this moment ever since."

Blank horrified amazement was stamped on Adair's face.

"Me! *me!* you love me!" she cried with a wild sudden laugh, that rang shrill and eerie through the keen air. "Oh, good God, she was spared this at least!" She clasped her hands over her eyes, and her voice broke into a hysterical sob.

Dallas looked at her in helpless bewildered

pain. For a second the dreadful thought occurred to him that her grief had not only warped his love's heart against him, but her very mind. Then light flashed on him: he stood transfixed, and a dark flush rose over his face.

"If you will not tell me, I must ask you. Adair, forgive me if I pain you, but I must do it," he said, in a changed voice. "Is it possible that you thought it was your—your sister? Oh, my love, how could you think so? She was dear to me. If only because she was your sister she would have been so, but could you not see? Oh, Adair, be just to me; what did I do that you should think this of me? Have some pity on me, dear. Since I left you my whole heart has been full of you. I have looked forward to this moment night and day, and to the bare chance of there being some hope for me, and now to find that this is what you have been thinking of me. Did—did she think so?" in a tone of grief and shame. "If so, I am punished indeed." He would not protest further; he stood looking

in silence into Adair's eyes. It was bitter enough to find that the poor gentle child had been unwittingly misled by anything he might have said or done, but surely, surely Adair would acquit him of anything more. Was it possible she had thought him capable of cruel deliberate trifling with the poor thing, whose very weakness should have made her sacred to any man?

But there was no relenting in Adair's face. No pleading could in a moment undo the effect of weeks of bitter brooding. She could see nothing but Elfie's feeble hand groping for her precious papers; hear nothing but those pale stiffening lips breathing the life out with this man's name, who was now telling her that he had not meant it, trying to make her believe that it was she whom he had loved all the time. He had been thinking of her, while her child had been pining out her young life for him. She was filled with hot sudden shame, as if she too had been a traitor towards the helpless dead. Love! she shuddered at the thought.

“We need not speak of it any more. I am sorry if I have wronged you in my thoughts,” she said, in a cold lifeless way; “but she is dead. She never harmed any one in her short life. I try to think that she is happy—that she understands now—that in some way it has been made up to her. Good-bye. I will try to think you did not mean it.” The words were uttered simply enough, but to Dallas they sounded like the cruellest, most scathing irony.

“Will you leave me with that reproach, Adair? If there is forgiveness for wilful sin, surely there might be mercy for a wrong so innocently done.” He was too grieved for her—too chivalrous to plead that, after all, he was not wholly to blame for the misunderstanding that had borne such bitter fruit. His life and his hopes were at stake; he could not let her go thus. “I do not ask you now, while your sorrow is fresh, but I will wait. I only ask that some day you will let me come back and tell you what I will not urge on you now.” The dark face had paled, and

looked livid under the cold moonlight; the young man's breath came quick and hard.

"There is no use. It would only be more pain to us both. No; do not say any more—do not come with me," in a tone that compelled obedience. She went away, and left him standing alone in the white moon-flooded silence.

The few days that followed made Adair long for Dr Morton's letter as for a deliverance. It came sooner almost than she could have ventured to hope, and for a wonder it was favourable. The great man had bestirred himself; a vacancy was offered her, and she was to begin her new duties in a week's time. Looking back afterwards on that week, it seemed a sort of feverish dream. There was no active opposition, such as she had feared, made to her going. Mrs Earlstoun, who had chosen to regard her refusal of Dallas as a personal injury, only said coldly that she might do what she pleased,—nothing that she could do would astonish her now. Agnes openly and incessantly marvelled at the folly of her sister.

That any one should choose, instead of wealth and independence, to wash and dress and tend sick paupers, passed her comprehension.

"I would have married *anybody*," she reiterated, sitting by while Adair packed her things. After all, there was not so very much to pack. "*Anybody*," she repeated with emphasis, "rather than have people say I was broken-hearted, as of course they will be sure to say. Nursing is a sort of taking the veil. Nobody takes to good works, and to looking for their reward in another world, until they have been thoroughly disappointed with the present one."

"Let them say what they like," said Adair, squeezing down the contents, and shutting the lid of the box with somewhat unnecessary vehemence,—“at least I shall not hear it.”

"What about us?" grumbled Agnes. "I suppose you think we shall enjoy hearing it."

Mrs Mackay came to swell the chorus of disapproving amazement. She seemed to be under the impression that Adair was going out to service—that she had "taken a place," as

the Rule Water damsels said—and no amount of explanation could disabuse her mind of the idea. “What will your aunt and uncle say?” was her unfailing question. Her chief comfort was that London was a long way off, and they might not hear much of it, till she was deprived even of that consolation by remembering that the Earlstouns spent most of their year in London.

“Don’t distress yourself, Mrs Mackay,” said Adair; “we are much less likely to encounter each other there than if we were set down at opposite ends of the Sahara.”

“I don’t know anything about the Sahara,” snapped Mrs Mackay, “but I am sure Mrs Earlstoun won’t like to have her own niece working for wages in the same town as herself.”

“I have no doubt she will learn to bear it in time,” said Adair gravely, and Mrs Mackay relapsed into incoherent murmurs about “flying in the face of Providence.” She had been so far taken into confidence as to Adair’s “extraordinary conduct” by her mother, who found

it a salve to her wounded dignity to make known what her daughter was throwing away.

Saunders was inconsolable, and in addition to his regret at her departure—"the only cratur, though she was but a lassie, that had some glimmerins of what a gairden needed," as he put it—his national pride was wounded that she should have elected to go to London.

"Noo, Miss Adair, wadna Embro' hae been gude eneuch for ye? They tell me they come there frae a' pairts to get made doctors; an' surely they could hae made a nurse o' ye, if ye maun be one—though, to ma thinkin', nursin' comes nat'ral to a woman, if she's worth her salt. Ye could hae jinkit back an' forrit at the week-ends, an' we'd aye hae been seein' ye; but Lunnon! it's banishment clean and fair."

Adair had thought she was eager to be gone till the good-byes had been said, that saddest one of all to which no response could come,—till the dog-cart was at the gate, and the parting moment had fairly come. Then the great unknown world, into which she was to make her first plunge, yawned vast and ter-

rible before the home-bred girl. She looked round at the trim sheltered garden, the low house front shorn of its summer wealth of green, at the familiar hills which had bounded her world till now, and then into her mother's face.

"Oh, mother, mother, mother!" she cried, with an "exceeding great and bitter cry," flinging her arms round the erect little figure.

"It is your own wish, remember, Adair," said Mrs Earlstoun, preserving her dignity, though with a considerable effort; "you can always come home when you grow tired of it."

Down at the Water-foot, the people were standing about the few cottage-doors to see Miss Adair go, though they were too undemonstrative to make any special sign of farewell. At the Manse gate all the little Mackays were gathered, a bunch of ruddy faces and red tousled heads. They raised an inarticulate howl, whether of grief or of excitement it would be hard to say. Whizz! Bobby Mackay, the fattest, sturdiest, noisiest, *stickiest* of all the imps, had flung a dilapi-

dated old shoe with such deadly aim, that it just missed Adair's face, and fell at her feet. She picked it up.

"For goodness' sake pitch that horrid thing out! You never mean to keep it!" exclaimed Agnes in disgust.

"Indeed I do," said Adair, with rather a doubtful laugh, waving a farewell to her youthful admirer. "You can tell Bobby I shall keep it as a last remembrance of the Rule Water."

The train was late, and the two girls paced up and down the sloppy little platform in the raw wind, experiencing the usual difficulty of finding anything to say in those last few moments. The train bustled up with a great appearance of making up for lost time. Adair was hurried in, Agnes clung to the door, and, regardless of porters and passengers, burst into sudden tears. "Oh, Adair, why are you leaving us? how shall we get on without you?" she sobbed. The friendly station-master pulled her back,—the train was off. As it rounded the curve, from which Adair had so

often seen the white puff of steam rising, and longed to be following it into the world, she looked eagerly out for a last glimpse. There was the long glen, the grey patch of Earlshope amid the leafless woods, the white-sheeted hills, dim and ghostly, under the dun shifting canopy of snow-laden clouds, stooping already to the broad shoulder of the Misty Law. Another moment and the well-known forms were but a whitish blur against the cold wintry sky—they were gone, and with them her old home, her old life, her very self, seemed left behind for ever.

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

“ Three peaks against a saffron sky
Beyond the purple plain,
The dear remembered melody
Of Tweed once more again.”

THERE they were at last, the triple crests of the Eildons, if the subtler suggestions of sound could only be imagined amid the rattle of the train, rushing down from the ridge of hills that divides Teviotdale from Tweed. Adair let down the window: she was alone in the carriage, so there was no one to shudder and protest at the sudden inrush of keen evening air. To her those hills were not merely the outposts of her “ain countrie,” of home itself, but round that threefold summit hung all the glamour of young romance; it symbolised to her all the blending of song and story, of lore and legend, that has made the Borderland

enchanted ground. She leant far out, drinking in great draughts of the sharp northern air, to her like cold waters to a thirsty soul, and revelling in the great sweep of stainless smokeless sky. Last night, from the high hospital windows, beyond a wilderness of roofs and chimneys, she had seen the sun go down, a rayless crimson ball, dim and lurid through the city smoke and vapour; now it was setting behind the Eildons! The magic trinity of hills rose clear and bold against the illumined sky. Every moment the scene was growing more and more familiar—the gentle slopes, the wooded haughs, the soft curves of Tweed were unfolding before her. There was the great grey shell of the abbey, its soaring arches and shattered columns rising out of the mean huddle of houses crowding round it. There at last was Tweed itself, brimming with the autumn rains, and flowing broad and strong beneath the bridge. A cloud of smoke ahead, flaring the horizon amber, indicated the Muirshiels factories. Adair threw herself back into her corner, and the

intoxication of release and return subsiding a little, she began to think somewhat more soberly of this home-coming. Nearly three years had passed since that bleak January day when, with aching heart and eyes, she had watched the snowy hills fade and sink out of sight, feeling as if she were bidding good-bye to home and hope and youth together. On the weeks and months that had followed, she hardly dared to look back even yet from the vantage-ground of her strong brave womanhood. Like one rescued from the beating waves, she shuddered yet to think of the time when she had been tossed helplessly to and fro upon their surges — when her soul had been

“Alone on a wide, wide sea ;
So lonely 'twas, that God Himself
Scarce seemèd there to be.”

Alone ! yes, she had indeed been alone, a stranger in that great, noisy, crowded, and yet empty world of strangers—the past bitterness, the future a blank. Alone in that utmost desolation when the despoiled heart cries

out in despair, "Ye have taken away my gods, and what have I left!" What, indeed, when gods have been given the place of God, and they have been swept away—when if the Eternal be discerned at all by the bewildered soul, stunned by the shock that has laid its idols low, it is but as the Avenger, or at most as "the unknown God." Out of that "horrible pit" of stifling doubt and darkness she had made her way, step by step, upwards to firmer footing. She had worked out her own salvation, as each must for himself or herself, and had found the light she needed, which, come what might, could never wholly desert her again. She had found her life-work in the world, and when once that has been fairly entered upon, no one can long be wholly unhappy. When her long-deferred holiday came at last, she was surprised to find that her regret at leaving was almost as great as that of her patients in losing her. "Don't stay very long," one poor fellow had whispered, "and I'll try to live till ye can come and close my eyes." Don't stay long—that had

been the general cry as she had gone round for the last time.

It was not only she herself who was changed, —she would find changes awaiting her too; not so much in her own home, but at Earls-hope they had come thick and fast. The summer after his son's marriage Mr Earls-toun had died suddenly, and the crash which neighbours, in that spirit of prophecy whose chief inspiration is hope, had been predicting for years, came at last. Douglas found himself owner of a great house, an old name, and a heritage of debts and mortgages only too likely to burden him for life. For years the establishment at Earls-hope had been kept up on a scale beyond what his income warranted, but Mr Earls-toun had lacked the courage to deny anything to his beautiful brilliant wife. His eldest son's extravagance had cost him more than any one ever knew. Perhaps indolence of nature had kept him from boldly facing his position, or pride of race would not allow him to retrench in time. It might have been only the sheer

fatalism of a man on the downward track that had blinded him to the coming ruin, but he had gone on borrowing and raising money in whatever way he could, till his sudden death had only hastened the inevitable ending by a little. All this Adair had only heard through Agnes's letters. She had seen nothing of the Earlshope people since she had gone to London. Their paths lay widely enough apart. During her first year there, Mrs Earlstoun had remembered her existence sufficiently, when the season came round, to send her an occasional invitation, but these Adair had steadily declined, and gradually communication had ceased altogether. It was better to be done with the old life altogether, if ever she were to make a new one for herself, Adair had said. Douglas's wife had returned to the stage, she knew, but of himself she had heard nothing, save for a kind little letter he had written to her mother, soon after his father's death, and which Agnes had forwarded to her. It was addressed to his Aunt Aggie in old boyish style, and expressed the hope that

she would allow him to do for her what his father had done. He added that she must not allow anything she might hear about his affairs to cause her anxiety. As soon as Adair had received it, she had sent off all she could spare of her slender salary, and had begged her mother not to take more of Douglas's money than she could possibly help. She little dreamed, however, while she was stinting herself in every possible way, that the full allowance from Douglas was being accepted as well, with the result that much greater comfort now reigned in the Old Manse. "Adair would not send us the money unless she could spare it," Agnes said coolly, "and I don't see why we should not take from Douglas what we did from Uncle Alex. He can't be so badly off as people say—at least, as a rule, no one supports his cousins and his aunts unmurmuringly unless he has plenty for himself. Adair was always absurdly quixotic."

Earlshope had remained closed and empty till a few months before, when it had been let; and Agnes's occasional letters—for she

was no great correspondent—had been chiefly filled with laughing descriptions of the new tenants, an elderly brother and sister. By-and-by her allusions had become more respectful—Mr Mitchell's kindness, Mr Mitchell's wealth, were constantly referred to. Her last letter, a hurried scrap, had announced that she had news, great news, to tell, but that since Adair was coming so soon, she would keep it to electrify her on her arrival. Adair had felt a passing wonder more than once as to what could have excited her usually very composed little sister so much, and was speculating on it afresh with some amusement when the train rattled into the long, windy Muirshiels station. She was preparing to leave the train to wait for the humble "local" which would follow in the wake of the express, and deposit her at the station for the Water-foot, when she noticed a little lady walking up and down, and scanning the long line of carriages. Adair glanced at her carelessly, noting her trim costume of dark-green cloth and sable fur, very becoming to her fair pretti-

ness. The girl turned round again, and ejaculating "Aggie!" Adair precipitated herself upon her in somewhat avalanche fashion, forgetful of everything save that a dear home face was before her once more.

"Good heavens, Adair! how you startled me! You don't mean to say that you have travelled *third class!*" with a hasty glance round, as if to assure herself that no one had witnessed her sister's plebeian mode of arrival.

"Is thy servant a millionaire that she should do anything else?" laughed Adair, although considerably taken aback. Memory, as a rule, is merciful, and allows the "little ways" of our absent dear ones to fade into the background, from which on reunion they are occasionally revived with startling suddenness. "Have we come suddenly into a fortune, or has some fairy godmother turned up, that I should commit such an extravagance? Besides, I am not Miss Earlstoun nowadays; I am Sister Adair, and not bound down by the rules of young-ladyhood any longer."

“Fiddle-de-dee ! we’ll see about that,” said Agnes, recovering her good temper. “It does not matter, since Allen was not about. Here he comes at last.” And Agnes advanced towards a lordly personage in livery, bidding him see to Miss Earlstoun’s luggage, as to the manner born, and led the way outside to where a very well-appointed brougham with a pair of handsome horses was waiting.

“Well, Cinderella, when does your coach turn into a pumpkin ? not till we are safely landed at the Old Manse, I hope, for this is very comfortable, I must admit,” said Adair, when, cosily tucked in with fur rugs, they were bowling along towards the Water-foot. Agnes laughed delightedly.

“I thought I would give you a little surprise. How I used to envy the Earlshope people being driven from Muirshiels, instead of having to wait for that wretched slow train to jog one on a bit and set you down four miles from home after all. But it’s our turn now.”

“Have compassion on my curiosity. Think of the feelings of a humble wayfarer, expect-

ing only the village shandrydan, at being whisked off in a carriage-and-pair in this fashion, just like a fairy tale, with you for the fairy princess. How nice you look, Aggie!" admiringly. "What has happened? I begin to think it must be the fairy prince, not the godmother, after all."

"You dear old thing, I am so glad to have you back again," with genuine if somewhat patronising affection. "Yes, I always said we were not a bad-looking family, if only we had some decent clothes. And you are looking very well too, Adair, and not a bit *old*. Really I was afraid to think what you might be like after all this time."

"You take quite a load off my mind," with a laugh; "but my looks will keep to some other time. I want to know where this"—touching the soft dark fur—"and all the rest of it, has come from."

"Cannot you guess?"

"It is utterly and absolutely beyond me."

"What would you say if I told you I was to be mistress of Earlshope by-and-by?"

“Earlshope! How?—why?—impossible!”

“Oh, not at all, since I expect to be Mrs Mitchell in a week or two.”

“Aggie, you cannot mean it!—not the old man you wrote me about—oh, surely not!”

“He is not so very old,” said Agnes, pettishly. “I daresay I wrote a lot of rubbish just to fill up my letters. Of course he is a great deal older than I am, but he might easily be that and yet not be a Methusaleh, I should hope. I have no objections, however, to be an old man’s darling, I can assure you. Positively I have to beg him not to give me things. You have no idea how kind he is. As soon as he heard you were coming, he said that we must not let you go away again—there would always be room for *my* sister in Earlshope; so, Adair, you may say good-bye to that horrid hospital now. And oh, Adair, he is so nice to mammy! It is so delightful to be able to get her everything she can fancy.”

“Yes, it must be,” said Adair, with a little sigh. After all, this world is arranged in a

somewhat perplexing fashion. That last sentence almost made her envy Agnes for a moment. "That must make you very happy. You are happy, dear?" wistfully.

"Happy! of course I am happy," said Agnes, briskly. "I shall have everything on earth I can wish for. No more old gowns—eh, Adair? Do you remember that day we went to Edinburgh, and the fidget you were in, and how Uncle Alex, poor man, put you off with a paltry fifteen pounds? I could not help laughing over it the last day I was there shopping, when I spent fifteen pounds a good many times over, I can tell you. We are to be married almost immediately, and go to Italy and all sorts of places for the winter, and I am to have a house in town next season, and Lady Warriston or the Duchess herself will be very glad to present me, and then Miss Earlstoun will be presented by her sister, Mrs Mitchell (the name is not all that could be desired, I admit, but that does not matter), and we shall make a bonfire of that cloak and bonnet, and you and I, I fancy, will be able

to make some folk sit up, as her ladyship elegantly says."

"You are very kind, Aggie," said Adair, smiling. Like a wise woman she had learned not to waste her strength in needless argument, but to reserve it for the actual tug of war.

"And oh, Adair, only think of it!" went on Agnes, even more excitedly—"think of me being able to invite Isabel to *Earlshope*! Only think of taking her about and showing her all the improvements I shall make, for I have ever so many plans in my mind. She will be as placid as the full moon, of course, which she somewhat resembles by the by, but all the same she won't relish seeing the little country chit to whom she used to offer Clara's frocks, mistress of the old place. Oh, it will be superb!" Agnes clasped her hands in ecstasy. "Many a time at night I waken up and think it must be all a dream, and that I shall find myself wondering in the morning how much longer some venerable frock will hold out, or if I dare treat myself to a pair of new gloves. It seems really too good to be true. Mr Mit-

chell is apparently of the same opinion, for he says unless he sees me half-a-dozen times a-day, he cannot believe in his good fortune."

"Has he not a name of his own? Or do you always call him *Mr* Mitchell?" laughed Adair.

"Like all wealthy elderly men, his name is John, of course, and when he is specially good I call him 'dear John,'" said Agnes, a twinkle in her eyes; "but the proceeding always smacks of irreverence to me, as if I were to salute the Rev. Robert Mackay as Bobby."

"But what is he like? Tell me something about him, dear."

"You will see him for yourself soon enough. We go there every evening, but perhaps you would be too tired to-night. Miss Mitchell is a queer old soul: she will amuse you. I flatter myself I have come round her nicely; but when I am Mrs Mitchell, I have stipulated that she will have an abode for herself and her tracts and her comforters, and all the rest of it. Mammy comes with me,—that I insisted on."

“Well, if ‘dear John’ can exist without you for a night, I should dearly like to have our first evening to ourselves.”

“Look here, Adair,” said Agnes, more seriously than she had yet spoken; “you always were a romantic goose, and I know quite well you are thinking I am a cold-hearted worldly little cat. Perhaps I am. I always did think ‘with all my worldly goods I thee endow’ was the most important part of the marriage service, and the more goods there are the better. Life isn’t worth living nowadays unless one has plenty. And I want plenty: I want dresses and diamonds and furs, and carriages and horses, and fun and flattery, as much as you please. I want people to be saying, ‘That’s the pretty Mrs So-and-so; how well she dresses!’ and to be fighting for my invitations, as I promise you they will. Well, here comes a good kind man, who is not only willing to marry a penniless lass, which precious few, except in books, will do, but who will do everything I ask, and more too, for mammy,

and for you too, if you are not too proud to take it. Am I to say 'No, thank you,' and wait for some possible 'braw wooer' to 'come doon the lang glen,' who will at once be smitten by my charms, unless I am too aged by that time, and fall at my feet and exclaim, 'Maiden, wilt be mine?' That's rather a hazy prospect, isn't it?" laughed Agnes; "though, to be sure, the Rev. Gavin Paterson of Muirshiels seems to regard this handmaiden with favour. He might throw me the handkerchief. His eyes are rather weak, and he has a slight stammer; but he has quite a nice manse, and nearly two hundred a-year, I should think, not to mention the high privilege of being a co-worker in the vineyard. That is the other alternative; would you advise it, Adair? I never did pretend to lofty motives, but I have no doubt 'dear John' and I will be quite as happy as the most rapturous pair of lovers. Look at Douglas. I suppose he married for what people call love. If he didn't, I can't think what he married for."

“We must surely be getting near home now,” said Adair, letting down the glass and peering out into the gathering darkness. “What about Douglas? Has his marriage not turned out well?”

“Do put up that window—it is fearfully cold. I only say what I hear; really, I don’t know much about it. Miss Charteris, as she calls herself still, was at Canonbie, and at Middleton too, last autumn. She is no end of a swell now—dresses like the Queen of Sheba, people say; but we were not good enough, I suppose, to be invited to meet her. That will be altered by-and-by, I fancy. Douglas did not come with her—indeed I have not seen him for ages. He was not here, you know, when Uncle Alex died, and after that he only came for a few days with Mr Moncrieff before the house was shut up. They say, though, that Douglas has got dreadfully fast, and that he and his wife are hardly ever together. Of course, it may not be true,” said Agnes, carelessly. She was too entirely and happily absorbed

in her own affairs to recall such ancient history as her sister's supposed interest in her cousin.

"Do you hear often from Aunt Evelyn or Isabel?" asked Adair, looking out at the bright circles of light from the carriage lamps.

"Very seldom; but, as I say, I think our existence will be worth remembering by-and-by. The Maxwells are still in the North—in Inverness-shire. They have made a lovely place of Middleton, I must say. I mean to profit by some of Isabel's ideas, and to improve upon them. Sir Claud is taming down wonderfully; the claims of humanity are being quietly shelved. Aunt Evelyn is not very well, I believe."

"What is the matter?"

"I am sure I have no idea. I haven't your professional interest in disease. I should think it disappointment, most likely, poor soul. It must be a great change to her, after queening it so long. Who would have thought three years ago that I shall

be in her place soon!" said Agnes. Returning to her self-congratulation, she poured out for the rest of the way a stream of plans and projects, and indulged in triumphant visions of riding over the necks of her prostrate enemies, amongst whom were classed all those whose ideas of Miss Agnes Earlstoun's importance and merits had hardly equalled the damsel's own. Adair scarcely heard her; she put in a vague word of assent now and then, and Agnes was too self-engrossed to require more. She had heard more than enough to disturb her hardly won peace. Honestly, she could say that she wished for nothing but Douglas's happiness; but would she have been wholly and heartily satisfied to hear that the marriage had in every way proved all that could be desired? It is well, perhaps, not to probe our feelings to the very roots. Apart from that, however, Agnes's gleeful malice jarred upon her. Something of the old clan feeling — that staunch, unswerving loyalty to race and name — was ingrained within her, and little

cause though she had to love her relatives, she could not rejoice with her sister over their downfall. Mrs Earlstoun had impressed her imagination, if not her heart, and it was painful to her to think of the stately beautiful woman as a discrowned queen—poor, and ailing, and lonely. Perhaps she should go to see her aunt when she returned to London. She might be able to do something for her now. She ought not to have rejected her friendship so entirely, perhaps; her offers of it might have been more kindly meant than in those bitter days, she had been inclined to think. It was unlikely that she would meet Douglas, and even though she did——

“Are you asleep, Adair?” said Agnes. The carriage had stopped at the garden gate. The house-door stood open, and the sight of a little figure, outlined against a most unusual flood of light from the hall behind, drove for the moment every other thought from Adair’s mind.

CHAPTER II.

“It is well with the child.” Adair read the words over and over again, as she sat looking at the little cross above her darling’s head. A Scotch country churchyard, as a rule, is an unlovely place enough; a bare four-square enclosure of rank, unkept grass, swelling here and there into nameless mounds, or dotted with clumsy headstones. The kirkyard at the Water-foot was no exception to this, and when earth had been committed to earth, Adair had paid but one shuddering visit to the spot. “She goeth to the grave to weep there,” may be the almost universal instinct of the grief-stricken heart, but to her the sight of that new-made mound only emphasised all the more cruelly the separation between her and Elfie. She had

stood looking with blank eyes at the trampled grass and the raw newly turned earth under the low January sky. And she must leave her sister *there*, she had said to herself, as she had turned away with dragging limbs, and a deadlier chill at her heart than the sighing mist-laden wind could bring. The memory of that day, even to such a trifle as the look of her footprints in the spongy melting snow, had haunted her like a nightmare, rising unbidden before her, and blotting out fairer, tenderer visions; and to-day it had made her pause and stand for a moment with beating heart before she pushed open the heavy iron gate and went in. It was a mild, mournful day of late autumn; the yellow leaves were dropping thick and fast into the quick current of the Rule; thin whitish vapours hung over the low-lying fields, and lay in wisps among the folds of the hills. The heavy air was stirred now and then by a wandering breath that rose and fell like the sigh of restful weariness settling down to repose. Here and there

the pale stubble-fields were already being turned over, and the brown, moist, glistening furrows seemed to link the time of fruition and slow decay to a fresh spring of promise. From the village came the clink of the anvil, the children's voices sounded from the playground, now and then there rang out the sharp bark of some watchful collie. Bare though it might be, was it such an unfitting resting-place after all?—within hearing of the sounds of homely daily life, close by the “place where prayer was wont to be made,” and folded round by the quiet hills. The grey, peaceable, motionless sky stretched out above, the hush of nature, her labours over, the fitful autumn breeze,—all seemed to echo and confirm the words upon the little cross, which, with the old, simple, familiar name, and the two dates which summed up the brief vanished life, were all it bore. Adair had chosen the words herself, when she had sent home her first earnings to raise this little memorial, but with none of the resignation or submission whose very spirit the words

seem to breathe. It was well with Elfie, well with any one so soon escaped from life, she had said bitterly to herself.

She knew better now ; life and the world were not all gloom and barrenness, as in her young heartbreak they had seemed then. "It is well with the child," she was able to say now in its fullest meaning, with a gentle sadness more in keeping with that innocent life, that sweet guileless nature, than her first passion of revolt against what she had deemed the cruelty of God and man. Cruel ! Who had been more cruel and unjust than she herself, in her hard blind anger ? It had all been a mistake, a miserable mistake, on the part of all three ; but she had had no right to cast all the blame upon one, and to shut her ears to reason or entreaty. If the dead may be supposed to look back upon life "with larger, other eyes than ours," so, after some supreme life-crisis is over and gone, we can at times look back on our former selves, our old life, with something of that wider view, that calm dispassionate judgment,

which is only possible when the strife is at an end, and the battle-smoke dispelled. Yes, she had been unjust, blindly unjust in her pain,—she could admit it now. She would even acknowledge it to Mr Dallas, should she see him again, and should he care now to know that she had done him this tardy justice. But three years was a long time, and memory was pitifully short. How inevitably, how irresistibly the present drove out the past, she knew but too well. In her full busy life, with mind and body often strained to their utmost, although Elfie could never be forgotten, was not her gentle memory becoming somewhat like the waning moon hanging white and faint against the bright morning sky, hardly heeded amid the bustle of waking life below? If it is bitter to part with our joys, there is a strange pang in the consciousness that a grief has perforce been left behind on the way of life.

Adair rose with a sigh. She must not linger too long—Agnes would be waiting for her to

accompany her to Earlshope. Adair shrank from the prospect, as from the rough handling of a hardly healed bruise. One more look back, the gate fell behind her with a clang, and the present rushed in again, or rather the future. She had been but a day at home, but already she felt that it could be home for her no longer. In those three years she and her mother and sister had drifted far apart,—their world, their interests, their aims were hopelessly unlike. She could never, as Agnes planned, sit behind her in her triumphal chariot,—receive Mr Mitchell's bounty, and go back to a life of aimless young-ladyhood, with no other object than to follow her sister's example more or less successfully. *That*, at least, was utterly impossible. Agnes meant it all kindly. She would be hurt and vexed when her favours were refused, but it could not be helped; she had her own life to live, and her work to do. Besides, after a time they would be happier without her. The old bitter knowledge that, with all her love and efforts, she had but a small share of her

mother's heart, had forced itself on her anew, even in those early hours of meeting again.

"I am falling back into my old ways; I thought I had given up brooding," she said with a smile, and giving herself a sort of mental shake. "I had better go in and see Saunders; it will be a wonder if he cannot supply me with a tonic." As she entered the little garden, Marget came down the path to meet her, the old placid smile on her broad patient face.

"It's yersel', Miss Adair! When I heard tell ye had come, I says to mysel', It'll no be lang or she's here. He'll be fain to see ye, if he kens ye, puir man! but deed it's hardly likely."

"Why, what's the matter? has he been ill?" asked Adair, pausing at the door. To conceive of Saunders being ill seemed an impossibility.

"Didna ye hear? I thought Miss Agnes wad hae tell't ye," said Marget, looking somewhat hurt; "but, to be sure, she's unco

ta'en up the noo, an' ye'd hae muckle else to speak o'."

The little kitchen was as spotless as ever. The big fuchsia still blocked the low window. The firelight, now beginning to overpower the dim grey of the autumn afternoon without, awoke ruddy gleams and reflections from the rows of polished "tins," the pride of Marget's heart, and the due scouring of which was one of her principal occupations, and from the highly glazed crockery, gaudy plates and bowls, arranged on the old-fashioned high-backed dresser. By the side of the fire Saunders was sitting, his hands folded on a big red handkerchief spread over his knees, and his eyes fixed on the leaping jets of flame. Through all the years from her earliest childhood Saunders had seemed to Adair as unchanging as the hills themselves, as little likely to show sudden and visible signs of age and decay as the squat sturdy steeple of the kirk, where he had pulled the bell-rope, Sabbath after Sabbath, through more than one generation. Save when that task was duly accom-

plished, and he had turned the big key in the kirk door for another week, and come home to enjoy his well-earned pipe, she had never seen him sitting thus unoccupied before, and the change gave her something of the sense of surprise and confusion that the reversal of a law of nature might. She sat down beside him and took one of the trembling knotted hands into her warm young clasp. He looked round then slowly and vacantly, but the keen frosty light was gone from the rheumy faded eyes. The under lip that used to be thrust out in such an opinionative manner hung loose and pendulous. Like many hale old men who have preserved their vigour and their faculties until far on in a laborious life, mind and body seemed at once to have failed together.

“Speak to him, Miss Adair,” said Marget, encouragingly. “He’ll maybe ken ye. He’s rale quiet and peaceable now, puir man. It’s the Miss come to see ye, Saunders,” she cried shrilly to the old man, as Adair still sat silent, too grieved to speak. “Ye havena forgotten the Miss, surely?”

"I have been a long time away, but you have not forgotten me, have you, Saunders?" said Adair, with an effort. "You are very much missed in the garden; I see now why it looks so neglected."

The familiar voice seemed to thrill some chord in the old man's memory. The dull eyes brightened a little. "Eh, Miss Adair, is't yersel'? I'm fain to see ye. They tell't me ye had gane awa'. An' so ye're to be mairrit an' settled at Earlshope after a'! I was ne'er ane for the mairryin', but I aye said ye'd be a braw pair—a braw pair," with a senile chuckle.

"Hoot, Saunders, man, ye're forgettin' a' thegither," broke in Marget; "it's Miss Agnes, no' Miss Adair, that's to be mairrit an' leeve at Earlshope. But it'll be your turn next, Miss Adair, nae doot," consolingly.

"Haud your tongue, woman; d'ye think I dinna ken what I'm sayin'?" with something of the old positive tone in the broken quavering voice. "What's Miss Agnes got to do wi' Earlshope or Maister Dooglas. Him and Miss

Adair were aye thegither, an' it's to be a' richt noo, an' a gude thing for him an' the auld place too."

"Saunders, ye daft auld body," cried Marget, scandalised, "do ye no' mind that Maister Dooglas is mairrit already, an' awa frae Earlschope lang ago?"

"Ay, ay, he was ower lang awa', ower lang—I aye said so; but he's back noo, an' it'll be a' richt," his eyes wandering towards the fire again.

"Don't trouble him, Marget," said Adair gently, as the old woman was evidently preparing for another volley of explanations. "It does not matter. I am very, very sorry to see him so changed."

"Ay, it's a sair change," shaking her head. "I sometimes wonder if I'm mysel', or if this is oor hoose, when I dinna hear him come rampagin' in, an' flytin' on the weemen-bodies as he was aye doin' for something or other. Aweel, he's maybe nane the waur o' a woman-body noo, an' he only kent it," with some pardonable satisfaction in even this partial vindication of her

sex. "But if you'll excuse me sayin't, I'm thinkin' it's time ye were hame, Miss,—ye're lookin' unco white-like. It canna be gude for ye amang so mony sick folk."

After a vain attempt to arouse the old man's attention again, Adair went away. Marget followed her, dilating on the general satisfaction at Miss Agnes's "gran' marriage," and at the prospect of having "ane o' the auld name in Earlshope again." At the gate she laid a detaining hand on the girl's arm. "Ye'll excuse him, Miss Adair, puir auld body—he doesna ken what he's sayin," she said anxiously.

"Oh yes," said Adair, hastily; "he has got confused between Agnes and me, I suppose; but it is very sad to see him as he is. I had looked forward so much to seeing Saunders again; we were great friends in the old days, Marget, and this has been quite a shock to me, it has been so unexpected,"—her mouth quivering a little.

"Ay, he had an awfu' opeenion o' ye, Miss Adair. He fair angered Mrs Mackay whiles,

the way he wad praise ye up. Ay, it's a sad sicht, but he's weel ta'en care o', though I say it as shouldn't; an' after a', it's just what we maun a' come to," said Marget, with the plain-spoken philosophy of the poor.

She stood for a moment leaning her elbows on the little gate, and looked after the girl till the tall figure had disappeared into the dim, distanceless, early falling twilight.

Marget was by no means imaginative, nor given to indulge in sentimental reminiscences; but somehow a very different picture flashed across her mind—a still breathless Sunday afternoon, glen and hills blazing in the broad sunshine, and Adair in her white dress going down the dusty road with her cousin Douglas by her side.

"Puir lassie! it maun be hard on her comin' back after a', an' her sister makin' sic a gran' marriage,—an' gettin' Earlshope, too, where she wad dootless expeck to be hersel' had the bools but run richt; though 'deed, if I were a bonnie young lass like Miss Agnes, I couldna stamack that auld man, not for

Earlshope an' a' he could gie me. Wha wad hae thocht it, when we were a' so fain to see Maister Dooglas hame! Aweel, he wasna mairrit yesterday, and Miss Adair was aye a wiselike lass; she'll hae got ower't by this time, nae doot," concluded Marget, with the comfortable optimism of her years, looking back from that vantage-ground upon love-troubles with much the same indulgent pity one might bestow on a child's fit of despair over a broken toy. The mist was getting raw and cold, the neighbours were all indoors, and the blink of firelight through the little window looked very cosy and inviting as she turned back to the cottage.

"He'll be wearyin' for his tea, puir cratur," she said, hurrying her steps a little. Every now and then she would pause amid her little bustle of preparation to regard the motionless figure and vacant face with a sigh and a shake of the head. "Nae wunner Miss Adair was so taken aback; it's a sair change, a sair change," she would mutter to herself, with a mixture of regret, and that half-pitying, half-

contemptuous sense of superiority which one old person derives from the failure of another. As his sister said, "Saunders was rale weel ta'en care o'," and in his complete dependence upon her, and her late-won emancipation from his yoke, Marget, if she had known it, was probably happier in "this time of affliction," as she and sympathising neighbours decorously phrased it, than ever she had been before in her much subjugated existence. But when is happiness ever fully recognised or acknowledged save retrospectively?

CHAPTER III.

"No more ruining one's gowns and temper by going across to Earlshope in all weathers," said Agnes, carefully settling a very bewitching hood over her hair, as a trim town-bred maid, a striking contrast to her red-armed predecessors, announced that the brougham was waiting.

Mrs Earlstoun had declined going. "I shall take a rest to-night, since you have Adair with you," she said, with a smile.

"Mammy finds my future sister-in-law a little fatiguing, for dear John is very properly absorbed in me. Never mind, you won't be troubled with her much longer; she will soon get back to her dear Clapham, and her refreshing pastor, and all her clubs and societies," said Agnes, with a laugh. "Be-

tween ourselves, I shall have no objection either to a little variety from our double *tête-à-tête*—indeed my graceful readiness ‘to name the day’ was a good deal owing to that. Now, Adair, if you are quite ready—pray remember how I am being pined for.”

Adair settled herself into her corner of the carriage, thankful to be spared the walk through the darkling woods and over the bridge to Earlshope, where every turn of the road, every bush and tree even, or glimpse of hill or water, recalled some bitter-sweet memory—memories that had already been thronging back only too thickly upon her. Was her victory less complete than she had proudly thought? she had asked herself in a sort of dismay, as she left the glimmering village lights behind her in the gathering night. She had said good-bye to the past, and had learned, or thought she had learned, to look back on that long dawn of expectation, that brief blinding flash of happiness, and the blackness that had followed, as though it had been a part of some

other life. Was her dearly bought calm so slight a thing that it could be shaken by the first utterance of a long-unheard name, or by the chance allusions of poor old Saunders's broken wandering talk? Poor old Saunders! Her eyes filled anew as she thought of the change in her old friend, with his caustic kindly talk, biting but bracing as a north-easter. That alone, she hastened to assure herself, was enough to account for the deepening sense of depression that she could no more overcome than she could shake off the clammy clinging mist. So she was busily arguing again with herself, like one in a sudden panic hastily strengthening defences which had been fondly deemed impregnable, when the carriage drew up under the well-known porch.

"Delighted to see you, Miss Earlstoun. I shall hope to be permitted to use a more familiar title ere long. You are very welcome to Earlshope, I can assure you, as any friend of my dear Agnes ever will be." The greeting was accompanied by a very impressive hand-shake.

Adair murmured she hardly knew what in reply. There was something so incongruous in being thus ceremoniously welcomed to *Earlshope* by a strange voice. All she could see of her host was the outline of a very tall thin figure; for the great hall, which had always been shadowy enough, however abundantly lighted, now seemed little less dark than the autumn night without, in the feeble glimmer of a couple of lamps. The big fireplace, where such a generous heap of logs used to blaze and crackle, yawned black and empty.

“One of dear Charlotte’s little ways,” said Agnes aside, with a shrug. “I don’t suppose there are hall-fireplaces in a six-roomed villa.”

Dinner would have been a somewhat silent meal, save for Mr Mitchell’s even flow of decorous duty-talk, delivered in a carefully modulated voice, and with an old-fashioned precision of language quite in accordance with his appearance. Adair could see him better now—one of those tall, thin, bloodless-looking men, whose age, when once they have passed fifty, is very difficult to determine. The pale,

large - featured face was hairless, save for scanty, closely trimmed side-whiskers; while every individual iron-grey hair seemed sedulously made the most of, and was diligently brushed forward to hide the gleaming space of increasing baldness. He had very prominent well - preserved teeth, which were frequently and fully displayed by that mechanical expansion of the lips which with some people passes for a smile. In his evening clothes his whole appearance was rather that of the confidential old family lawyer, who is such a familiar figure in old - fashioned story - books, than of the very successful stockbroker and speculator Adair understood him to be.

“How could she—how could she!” was her bewildered inward ejaculation, as she listened to his formal periods, and glanced from this embodiment of frosty elderly respectability to her sister’s dainty pink-and-white bloom. With this enigma before her, and the growing sense of confusion between past and present, Mr Mitchell’s conversational flourishes were somewhat lost upon her. They dined at a

small table, the lamp in the centre of which made but a little oasis of light, that left the rest of the long room in shadow. The grim old portraits of dead and gone Earlstouns, dimly seen as the firelight rose and fell, looked down from the walls like a band of ghostly watchers upon the shrunken pomp of those usurpers of their old place and name. In the drawing-room it was little better. The lesser one only was used, the curtains being drawn between it and the larger room, in which Miss Mitchell declared an army, not to speak of one solitary woman like herself, would seem quite lost.

“Indeed, my dear, the house is quite inconveniently large, and I am not at all sorry that John has got some one else to manage it for him. I am sure I never could have lived a winter here : as it is, I really cannot sleep at night for thinking of those doors and windows, and wondering whether they are all fastened ; maids are so careless, you know, and the wind makes such noises in those long passages. Really, I felt so lonely at night that

I was compelled to have Eliza sleep in the room next mine; for we might be all robbed and murdered, you know, and the servants hear nothing of it. Your aunt must have kept a great deal of company to fill the house, as dear Agnes tells me it used to be."

"Yes," said Adair, rather vaguely, scarcely knowing what she was assenting to, but conscious from the pause that some answer was expected. She had been glancing round the beautiful old room in which one generation after another of cultured men and women had lived, and where each had left some trace of their tastes or occupations, making up a harmonious whole, which no modern apostle of the gospel of art as applied to furniture can hope to emulate. No amount of *bric-a-brac*, or cunningly arranged draperies, or softly blended hues, can supply the lack of those associations with a still living past. What was it that had given it such an incongruous air of *bourgeois* respectability, transforming it as far as might be into that chamber of horrors, the average drawing-

room of that six-roomed suburban villa of which Agnes had spoken? Was it those virulent chintzes which had replaced the old tapestry or satin coverings and hangings? or that round table set out with books in the inevitable cart-wheel form—missionary travel or evangelical biography in the crudest of red-and-green bindings?—or was it chiefly the contrast between the commonplace little figure of the present occupant of the room and its former beautiful mistress. Miss Mitchell, unlike her brother, was short and plump, with a little, round, meaningless white face, under whose surface-mildness there was a certain acerbity of expression, suggestive of the *whey* rather than of the milk of human kindness. In her lap was a heap of grim dark-coloured knitting, at which she was working energetically. Adair's eyes involuntarily travelled upwards from her to a portrait of Mrs Earlstoun that hung above the mantelpiece, painted when she had come as a bride to Earlshope, and when the lovely face was in its first bloom. The bridal dress might be some-

what antiquated, but the indolent grace of attitude, the haughty pose of the head, were lifelike, while the hazel eyes from under their drooping lids seemed to look down in half-sad, half-haughty questioning on the changes time had wrought. Miss Mitchell glanced up too.

“Your aunt must have been very nice-looking when she was young ; but, to be sure, portraits are sometimes a little flattered,” she said.

“She was the most beautiful woman I ever saw—no picture could flatter her,” said Adair, warmly.

“Ah, well, it is a gift, no doubt, but hardly one to be desired. ‘Beauty is deceitful,’ you know, and it often brings a snare. I am afraid she must have been very much given over to the world ; it is to be hoped that her afflictions may prove a blessing to her yet. Her son’s marriage must have been a great blow to any God-fearing mother, though perhaps she hardly looked at it in the right light, poor woman ; and now I hear the young man is taking to very evil courses, which must be

very distressing to her, though it can hardly be wondered at."

"My cousin? Who says so?" asked Adair indignantly, though she recalled Agnes's careless words with a little pang.

"Oh, well, I have heard it once or twice. I never allow gossip, but one cannot help hearing things," said Miss Mitchell, somewhat fluttered by the sudden question. "I am sure I hope it is not the case, but can a man touch pitch and not be defiled? and of course he must be thrown amongst people and associations of the worst kind. I tremble for any young man when I hear of him even going to the theatre; but to marry an actress! I am afraid it shows great natural depravity. Of course, I would not take the liberty of speaking so unless I regarded myself as quite one of the family already," with a prim little smile.

"And so can avail yourself of the immemorial privilege of relatives to abuse one another," thought Adair. "What are you knitting?" she said aloud, somewhat abruptly, asking the first question that occurred to her,

—anything to prevent Miss Mitchell using or abusing her rights as a future relative any further.

“Comforters for the Seaman’s Mission,” heaving up the mass of wool with a satisfied smile. “You did not think of bringing your work with you, my dear?” with a glance at the girl’s folded hands.

“My work? no!” said Adair, with a little laugh. “I have been very hard wrought lately, and have come home for a rest, so I mean to do nothing and to do it thoroughly for a while.”

Miss Mitchell looked puzzled and rather shocked. “Well, my dear, you know we must give an account for our time; and for my part, I believe in having every moment occupied, and it is wonderful what you can accomplish. Now if you had a comforter, like what I am knitting, by you, I am sure you would find it a resource for odd moments. See, I have done all that already while we have been talking,” marking off several inches with a stubby forefinger. “And then, you know, the cost is not great. I order all my wool from Cutts &

Shortrede — such a nice place ! they always keep inferior qualities for Dorcas and mission work — quite good enough for the purpose, and very much cheaper.”

Adair listened to this exposition of economical beneficence in amused silence, watching the “inferior” wool rapidly passing through the fat little hands on which the diamonds flashed as the bright steel needles clicked busily.

“And so you have taken to nursing, my dear,” Miss Mitchell began afresh, after a moment’s struggle with a refractory stitch. “I have no doubt it is a very good work, and much needed, but really things are so changed nowadays. In my young days young ladies found their duties and occupations at home, and nursing and such things were left to quite a different class. Of course, if their papas failed, or any misfortune came, they would go out as governesses ; but there were four of us at home, though I’m the only one left now,” with a little decorous sigh, “and I am sure we would never have thought of

going out to work as long as our papa could keep us : but, dear me ! men and women are all mixed up now, and doing each other's work. It is very old - fashioned, I suppose, but I always hold to it, that a girl's proper place is home, and I feel glad that dear Agnes has always seen her duty in that light. Well, I am sure she has got her reward, dear girl," with a glance towards the *fiancées*. "Indeed, I quite think it was her devotion to her home and to her mother that attracted John's attention to her at first."

With all Adair's acquired philosophy, which enabled her to regard most of the little rubs of daily life with amusement rather than with annoyance, it was a little trying to average flesh and blood to find that the general impression at home was that her three years of "imprisonment with hard labour," as at first she had characterised her hospital life grimly enough to herself, had been a time of ease and enjoyment to her. Her mother and Agnes seemed comfortably to have forgotten that they had ever in any way profited by her

efforts. Mrs Mackay, whom she had met in the morning, had read her a homily in the line of Miss Mitchell's remarks, but very much more plainly spoken. An old friend has almost as undoubted a right to be disagreeable as a relative. She had wound up with the inevitable allusion to Agnes's brilliant prospects as the reward of merit, and of humble daily tasks dutifully done. She was very welcome to her reward, thought Adair, with a somewhat vexed inward laugh, when her attention was suddenly arrested again by Miss Mitchell inquiring briskly, "What do you think of mustard, now, my dear? I would like your advice as to that."

"Of mustard!" echoed Adair, bewildered, wondering if she had heard aright.

"Yes, my dear; you must be half a doctor by this time yourself, and I would like your advice about it. I am a perfect martyr to a pain here"—dropping the seaman's comforter for a moment to press both hands vaguely against her capacious, cushiony, black silk waist. "I have consulted ever so many

doctors, but really I don't think they have ever taken it up seriously enough. You have to be in bed with a fever or something before they will believe that you are really ill; and we are so far from a doctor here—really I would grudge to send for Dr Morton all the way to Muirshiels, unless it were something serious. It is very inconvenient being so far from a doctor. I often say to John, I hope I may not be taken suddenly ill before I get safely away from here; for, you know, we know not what a day nor an hour may bring forth, and one might be taken away before any help could be got. It is a great risk, a great risk, I am sure, and people ought to consider these things when they build their houses." Once fairly launched on the subject of this mysterious ailment which had baffled so many physicians, and the various remedies tried without any success, Miss Mitchell was safely disposed of for some time to come. Unless forcibly stopped, she would go on till the subject was exhausted, if that were possible, like a clock until it runs down. Adair

honestly tried to listen to the tale of woe with some show of sympathy at first, but her thoughts soon followed her eyes across the room to the other couple in what Agnes called the double *tête-à-tête*. Agnes, who was at one with Miss Mitchell in liking to have her fingers occupied, whatever the result of her industry might be, was sitting in the full lamplight, with a little shining tangle of silks and glittering gold threads before her. Some question had apparently arisen as to her embroidery, for Mr Mitchell was holding the one end of the piece of satin with an air of grave judicial consideration, while Agnes, looking up at him with her pretty saucy smile, held the other. That Mr Mitchell was very much absorbed in his little betrothed was perfectly evident. Under other circumstances the pair would have made a pretty picture enough, and the smile that the two bent heads, the two rapt interested faces, would have awakened, would have been rather a tender one, for there are few hearts that do not warm at the sight of a pair of lovers. The wistful "has been," the wistfuller

“might have been,” or the awaking magic possibility of the scarcely conceived “may be,” are all quickened anew, and honest youthful fooling may always be sure of sympathy, not unmixed with envy, beneath the outward laughter. Agnes stooped a little nearer; her fair fluffy “fringe” swept the bald shining forehead bent towards her. She was in very full toilet. “Dear John likes to see how his money has been spent,” she had said with a laugh, when Adair had remarked upon her unnecessary magnificence. The low-cut, faintly hued, shimmering satin displayed neck and arms and shoulders, almost infantile in their soft rounded whiteness, and with something of that dimpled prettiness which makes us press kisses on baby limbs. The strong lamplight brought out only too cruelly the contrast between the girl’s peach-and-pearl-like tints, and the parchment whiteness of her elderly lover’s face. Adair turned away with something like absolute repulsion. It was horrible, unnatural, she said to herself, unconsciously agreeing with Marget, and the wholesome unconven-

tional views of her class, as to love and marriage; and that Agnes was so serenely satisfied seemed worst of all. And yet, after all, wealth and position had often been bought at a heavier price, she supposed. That he was rather old for his bride was all that could be openly alleged against her future brother-in-law. He was in no way offensive—not rampantly vulgar in that ingrained commonness of nature which no education can refine, as many a rich man is, who, along with other luxuries, provides himself with an aristocratic wife. They were each satisfied with what the other could give,—Agnes with the ease and pleasure and power his money could procure for her, and he with the pretty looks and words and smiles she would give him in return. If that cheap flimsy currency satisfied him, if he made no demand for the pure gold of heart or head—well, perhaps so much the better. The shallows can sparkle as bravely as the depths, and life, after all, is largely on the surface. On one point, and one only, Adair could almost have envied her sister; she could set

their mother above the reach of any anxiety,—she could fill her life full with every pleasure and comfort she could wish. But not even for such a bribe could she do what Agnes was seemingly very willing to do. If there was nothing before her but lifelong loneliness, she had known, at least, what life might hold for its favoured ones; and not for the smoothest future of unemotional prosperity whose highest excitements would be the success of an evening, or some toilet triumph, would she part with that one brief memory. And while Miss Mitchell, having worked through six or seven doctors and their various cures, was now recounting her experiences of hydropathy, she let her thoughts wander back for a moment to that forbidden ground, that *Paradise Lost* of love and hope and boundless trust, whose gates she had closed upon herself with her own hands.

By-and-by Mr Mitchell tore himself away from his Agnes, and began to talk to Adair of her life at St Matthew's, as of some painful experience now happily at an end; and then

went on to discuss future plans, in which by inference she was always included, in a way that, in spite of his pompous, ceremonious manner, Adair felt was both delicate and kind. It would make the refusal she would be compelled by-and-by to give all the harder. Some consciousness of this infused more warmth into her comments upon "dear John" than she had imagined she would be able to give in answer to Agnes's expectant and inquiring "Well?" as soon as they were seated in the brougham again.

"I told him he would not only have to marry me, but my family," she said; "and I am happy to say he has a most proper appreciation of the favours bestowed on him in such personable ready-made relatives. How did you get on with dear Charlotte? You seemed to have plenty to say, at least. What did you talk about?"

"Mustard and missions chiefly," said Adair, strangling a yawn with a laugh.

CHAPTER IV.

"I AM afraid the poor fellow will be past speaking now. He was pretty far gone when I saw him last. He has asked for you very often."

"I wish I had known of it sooner. I only got the message when I came back to town an hour ago."

"He is some *protégé* of yours, I suppose?"

"Yes," with a smile; "he was the first trophy of my early enthusiasm. I was very red-hot in those days, and was as proud of him as a missionary of his first convert, or a fisher of his first salmon, whichever you prefer. I expected wonderful things to follow immediately. He has been very useful to me in a great many ways since. I don't

know whom I can put in his place. Poor Tom Welsh! I wonder how it happened?"

"A cab at a crossing, or something of that sort. One of those things for which nobody is to blame, of course; but it will cost the poor chap his life, I am afraid. I would not like to suggest that your trophy had perhaps had a little too much beer, but even converts have their lapses occasionally."

"Likely enough," with a laugh. "Poor Tom! it was rather his failing, but he was a good sort in spite of it."

Many sick and weary eyes followed the two men with envy as they went down the long ward together. Envy, not so much of the doctor, who was a familiar figure, as of his companion—of the life and vigour in the tall well-knit figure and dark handsome face, which, contrasted with the languid pallid ones around, had a southern depth of colouring and intensity of expression. The young house-surgeon had passed from the case of the unfortunate trophy to what was to him the burning question of the day—the support

of hospitals, and the need of State aid—in behalf of which he hoped to arouse Mr Dallas's interest. Though he had been but two years in the House, the member for Southport was already a well-known figure, from the prominent part he took in all social questions, though the occasions on which these can secure any attention are generally few enough. He was one of the foremost of that increasing band of cultivated men, who, having realised that each, whether he acknowledge it or not, is his brother's keeper, are striving to *do* something in his behalf, instead of merely enunciating helplessly that something *ought* to be done. The uttering of this declaration is generally the beginning and the end of the assistance which the majority of us render to the cause of social reform. As he had hinted, the first fervour of enthusiasm and expectation might have cooled, but it had cooled into a steady fixity of aim and purpose which had stamped itself on his very face and bearing. Launched on his pet subject, Dr Harding was talking rapidly and

earnestly, and making the most of his opportunity; but he broke off abruptly as they paused at a bed screened off a little from the others.

“He is in good hands, at least; he has our best nurse,” he said.

The nurse was seated on the bed. She had raised the dying man almost to a sitting position, to give ease to the poor bruised chest and labouring breath, and, with her arm round him, was supporting him against her shoulder. Her face was turned from them: Dallas’s attention was concentrated on the poor fellow he had come to see,—a waif picked off the streets some years before. He had been turned into a fairly respectable member of society, and had repaid the labour bestowed on him by a somewhat unusual display of gratitude towards the man who had befriended him. Dallas gave but a hasty passing glance at the nurse as the doctor spoke, but almost unconsciously something in the pose of the neck, the slope of the shoulder, struck him as familiar, and

awakened vaguely some memory he did not pause to interrogate further.

“How is your patient, Sister Adair? No better, I fear,” said Dr Harding.

Adair! The name thrilled through Dallas like an electric shock.

The nurse looked round. Was he dreaming, as he had done more than once, or were those Adair Earlstoun’s deep-brown eyes looking into his,—those eyes that had flashed such scorching disdain and anger on him under the frozen sky in the cold moonlight? For a moment she looked full at him, the flush he knew so well of old tinging even the broad white brow, from which the ruffled red-brown hair, which used to stray so softly round it, was swept back under the nurse’s cap. She showed no further sign of recognition beyond that lovely involuntary wave of colour, though she was less unprepared than he for the meeting; for while speech had been left him, the injured man had kept begging that Mr Dallas might be sent for. If he knew that Tom Welsh was dying, he

would be sure to come, the sufferer had said, with pitiful reiteration; while the dimming eyes wandered vaguely round in search of the familiar face. Somehow she had felt certain that the Mr Dallas so eagerly asked for would prove the George Dallas from whom she had parted in such bitterness, and whose name had still power to make her "old sorrow wake and cry." It was with no surprise, then, that she had looked up and had seen him standing beside her. The opportunity had come unexpectedly enough for making such amends as she could for that bygone night. She had mentally declared herself ready to do so, but that one brief glance made the task appear almost too formidable. Instinctively she felt the added force and strength of personality that had come with the years, with the wider field and the growing sense of power and authority. The dark eyes that had once met hers with such wistful entreaty looked stern. The face was stronger; had it grown harder too?

Adair turned to the doctor. "I have this moment sent for you, Dr Harding," she said ; and then she added something in a low voice, apparently indicating some faint token of improvement invisible to Dallas's unpractised eye.

"No—really !" ejaculated the doctor, keen interest aroused at once, and a low-toned consultation followed. Dallas drew back a little, and soon saw that he was wholly forgotten in the struggle between life and death. If that flickering life had been the dearest on earth to them—the one round which every hope was twined—nurse and doctor could not have been more absorbed in their patient. He strolled down the ward waiting to know the issue, talking meanwhile to some of the patients, most of whom were glad enough to hear a fresh voice and to secure a listener. He had an odd feeling that his health and strength were a sort of insult to those many sufferers, for which he ought somehow to apologise. He felt this most strongly while talking to one poor fellow—a young man much

about his own age. By chance their hands had met for a moment on the white coverlet. The contrast was painful enough. One was so strong and muscular, the other so feeble and nerveless. The poor fellow had looked at them both for a moment, and then, with a quick impatient sigh, had drawn his away with such strength as he had. Oh yes; he was well taken care of,—they did everything for him they could, he said wearily. No, fretfully, in answer to some offer of help; he was comfortable enough—as comfortable, at least, as he could be. The Sister would be coming round soon: there was no one like her—though all the nurses were kind enough; but then they couldn't grudge her to a poor dying chap like that—his eyes wandering towards the distant bed. Dallas's own eyes and thoughts were straying there too; but he sat and talked good-naturedly for a time, and was rewarded with—

“I wish you'd come back again, sir; it does one good to be talked to like a man, and not only a patient. Them readers and the ladies

as come mean it kind, I'm sure ; but its allays the same thing."

"Your *protégé* has really a chance of life after all," said Dr Harding, coming up. "I could hardly have thought it when I saw him last ; but it is wonderful what a good nurse can do,—more than a doctor sometimes"—with a smile. "They are always with their patients, of course. She is a splendid woman that ! I am quite disgusted that we are losing her."

"Why, where is she going ?" asked Dallas, with an eagerness that would have surprised the doctor had he not been so occupied with his own grievance.

"Some aunt or cousin is ill, and wants her. Relatives have no consideration : a woman like that should never be wasted on a single case. If ever I could have my model hospital, I should like to have her for matron. I think you need hardly go to him to-day," as Dallas made a slight movement. "I question if he would know you ; and he would be better not disturbed."

“ I will only take a look at him before I go, poor fellow ! I promise you I shall not speak to him.”

“ As to what we were talking about ”—his voice changing to the eager argumentative tone again—“ there are some other points I would like to have mentioned ; but I must go to another case—and I don’t suppose you have time to spare either. But you may possibly be here again, or I might write out our case for you ; and I do wish you would consider it, Mr Dallas. If you parliamentary people could only realise that there is a good deal to be done on this side of St George’s Channel, as well as on the other, we might have some chance. You keep your eyes more at home, I know ; but for the majority this country seems non-existent, especially where anything social or sanitary or sensible is concerned.”

Dallas promised his consideration, and Dr Harding hurried off, leaving him standing by the bed. Adair had not noticed his silent approach, and for a long minute he stood watching her. He had had many a bitter

thought of her too : his love for her had fought a hard battle with his resentment, which pain and pride had both declared to be just. He had written to her once and again after that miserable parting ; but receiving no reply, he had concluded she was unrelenting, unforgiving. Her rejection of him he could have borne—that was only what might have been looked for, he said to himself, in the humility of genuine love. He had had no ground for his hopes save his passion of desire. The thought of the suffering his want of thought and perception had brought upon Elfie filled him with shame and pain, and made him acknowledge that it was little wonder that in her first grief Adair should turn from him almost with aversion. She might have blamed him with what she would, and he would have borne it, if only she could have allowed that he was innocent in intention of the harm he had so unwittingly done. But to find that the woman he so deeply loved should have judged him capable of deliberately and basely fooling a poor child, guileless be-

yond the simplicity of childhood itself; that in spite of justice or mercy she should cherish this odious conception of him,—that was the maddening sting. And sting him it did into anger, that was perhaps the most wholesome corrective to his deep and abiding disappointment, till both had been partially merged in the thronging occupations of a busy life. At the first sight of her face all this tumult of mingled feeling had flamed into sudden life again; but as he stood watching her, the harder thoughts were rapidly melting away. The clear spring light from the long high windows was pouring down full on the beautiful pitiful face—beautiful ever to him at least. Its fair clear pallor was all the more striking in contrast with the ghastly hue of that poor common face, on which the shadow of death, though beaten back for a little, seemed still lingering. “We can’t grudge her to a poor dying chap,”—the words came back with fresh force to Dallas. He too felt that he would be well content if the steadfast shining of these sweet eyes might light him

through the darkness into that land where "they need no candle, neither light of the sun."

Adair changed the patient's position slightly, and Dallas exclaimed hastily, "Could no one relieve you? might not I, for a little? It must be very fatiguing for you."

Her slight start showed how completely he had passed from her thoughts. "Thank you," she said, with a rather tremulous smile, "I would not like to move him just now; besides, I am quite accustomed to it,—it is not nearly so fatiguing as it looks." She put a few drops of brandy between the drawn livid lips, and then looked up again.

"Mr Dallas," she said in a low voice, in which the strain of effort was evident enough, "I cannot leave my charge at present, but there is something I must say to you. It will not take long, and it will not disturb him. The last time we met," the blood rushing up, though her eyes did not waver, "you asked me to forgive you; it was I who should have sought forgiveness then for my misjudgment

of you, and I do it now. If you care to know it, I am sorry I was so unjust and so harsh. I was very unhappy then ; you could not know all the reasons, but if you did, you would not wonder, perhaps, that I was so bitter to you. I seemed to have lost everything—everything.” She broke off suddenly ; her apology had carried her further than she had intended. Her upturned face was white with the effort of uttering it, her eyes liquid. Dallas could stand their appeal no longer. He knelt down on the other side of the bed, so as to bring his eyes on a level with hers ; he would not stand above her and force her to look up to him. After such a beginning, and in the circumstances, any conventional speech was impossible. It was the strangest meeting, and it made the young man’s head swim a little. To hear Adair ask *his* forgiveness, to look into her eyes, to speak with her in that subdued whisper, and all in the unseeing, unhearing presence of the poor suffering wretch stretched between them—a ghastly third in this reunion !

“Do not speak of forgiveness, I beseech you, Adair; but you take a weight off my mind and heart. I need your forgiveness too, for I have had hard thoughts of you. It was very bitter to me that you should think of me as you did. I thought you wilfully unjust. When I wrote time after time in vain——”

“I did not answer your letters because I could not then say with truth what you wished me to say. I see now that I was wrong, and I have owned it.” The coldness of her words contrasted oddly with the soft whispered utterance, while her eyes were fixed again upon poor Tom’s face, where not the faintest flickering of an eyelid escaped her. Instinctively Dallas felt that he had gone too far,—that she thought he was presuming on her avowal; but it was impossible to continue whispering protests or appeals across the unconscious sufferer, in whom his nurse seemed once more wholly absorbed. The situation, which a little before had been so pathetic, became at once preposterous. Had Adair chosen the moment purposely, simply to prevent

him speaking freely to her? He could hardly think so, it was unlike her, and yet—He rose to his feet promptly enough. Tender thoughts were effectually banished for the time. He stood for an instant in uncertainty. Luckily for him, at that moment another nurse came up, to whom, after a few whispered directions, Adair resigned her charge. With a little farewell inclination she was moving away, when he said suddenly, “Stop—I must speak to you.” It was a command rather than an entreaty. Adair looked at him for a second. Something in his look or tone mastered her; she led the way to the end of the ward, where an empty bed or two made a quiet space under the long windows.

“Why do you mock me in this way?” Dallas broke out. “What is the use of this pretence? You do not want my forgiveness, you wish nothing from me,—you simply wish to get rid of the faintest sense of obligation towards me. You thought some apology due, and you have made it and satisfied your pride, but why speak of forgiveness? You have

neither forgiven me nor do you care whether I have forgiven you or not."

Adair flung back her head in the old impetuous fashion. "Mr Dallas, you have no right to speak to me in this way." She was more astonished than angry. Was this Mr Dallas, whose manner had been almost too womanishly gentle?

"I have a right. You gave it to me yourself. You say you have done me wrong; surely I have a right then to ask some reparation. Do you think it is nothing to me that I unconsciously caused such pain, not only to you but to that child whom I would have given my right hand to protect? Is it nothing to me that you judged me capable of sacrificing her to my vanity or amusement, call it what you will? What do you say of a man who can do such a thing? what does even the world say?—and yet you forced me to feel that you thought *that* of me. You do not think so now, you say; 'you have owned it.' With that I am to be content. Be it so, then; but forgiveness without mercy is of

little value. I have no wish, however, to thrust myself on you any further," moving away a little.

"What do you want from me, Mr Dallas?" said Adair in a changed voice, shaken out of her coldness by his words. That there was justice in them she felt. She *had* wished to satisfy her conscience, or was it her pride after all? to feel that a painful duty was over and done with—that was all.

What did he want from her? All or nothing, Dallas could have answered, in spite of pain and anger, as he looked into the troubled eyes.

"I want you to believe, once and for all, if you can, that until that night when I last met you, I never dreamed of what you then told me. It has been a grief to me ever since, as well it might be. I want you, as a sign of your forgiveness, to let me be your *friend*. I ask for nothing more." He watched her face for a moment. With those expressive lips and eyes, it was never easy for Adair to conceal her feelings.

"Come, Miss Earlstoun," in a more everyday tone of voice,—“why might we not be friends, unless my presence is altogether distasteful to you? Forgive me if I have spoken roughly.”

Perhaps it was that very roughness which had compelled her respect. After all, why should they not be friends? There was both strength and kindness in the dark eyes. She was very much alone. In a way she would be less so by-and-by, but relatives were not always friends. Her child had been dear to him too, though not in the way she had mistakenly fancied. He was a link to those last days of peace and brightness, before her life had been broken in two.

“Is it a bargain?” said Dallas with a smile, holding out his hand,—and after a second’s hesitation she silently put hers into it.

“May I come back again? Shall I find you here if I do? Dr. Harding tells me you are going away. May I ask where?”

“I am going to stay with my aunt, Mrs Earlstoun, for some time. I am sorry to leave

my work here, but she is ill and very much alone now, and needs some one."

"And so, of course, you are the one. Do you ever get any use of your life for yourself, Miss Earlstoun? In the old days it seemed to me that some one was always needing you then too."

"I am glad you can take such a charitable view. In my friends' opinion I am a very headstrong and selfish person for trying to be of some little use in the world, instead of being quite content, as I ought to be, with being a young lady at large," a sparkle waking in the brown eyes.

"If Mrs Earlstoun has not quite forgotten me, perhaps she will let me call, then. I did not know she was ill, or I would have done so sooner. When do you go?"

"As soon as my place here can be supplied; but I am in no hurry, for there are one or two cases I should like to see through before I go—your poor friend there for one."

"I must thank you for what you have done for him,—poor Tom! Dr Harding says if he

recovers, it is to you, not to him, that he will owe his life."

"Did he really? That was a great deal for Dr Harding to say," with a look of evident pleasure. "You see I am not without my professional pride, but you owe me no thanks, it is merely my business; and the patient that needs most care gets it." She had been completely routed herself and compelled to yield, so there was some feminine satisfaction in delivering this little prick. "Now," smiling, "I must send you away, or my patients will think I have forgotten them altogether."

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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His cousin Adair /



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